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"BEFORE HIGH HEAVEN I SWEAR YOU SHALL NEVER STAND AT THE ALTAR AS BERTRAND HAIGHTE'S WIFE!"

WILL SHE MARRY HIM?

Or, THE MASKED BRIDE.

BY MRS. MARY REED CROWELL.

CHAPTER I.

THE FIRST TOKEN OF THE STORM.

THE last brilliant tints of an autumn sunset were streaming brightly over the lawn at Edenwilde, lighting up with richly-warm glories the

spacious mansion, whose many windows caught the sunlight, reflecting it again in a blaze of molten goldenness.

Far off, to the west, the Hudson river was sweeping by, a veritable belt of flame, under that orange sky; eastward, skirting the rear of Edenwilde, were the solemn Highlands, crowned with their glowing, frost-touched jewels.

Before the front piazza, all white pillared and floored, and from whence Crystel Roscoe was watching the lights and the shadows as they flickered and swayed on the close-cut, velvety

greensward, stretched the large lawn, adorned by far-spreading trees, and low, bushy shrubs, with here and there a gleaming marble Ceres or Diana, and a dainty Niobe, all a-sprinkled from the spray of the shelled fountain, that tinkled and showered over the bright green mosses and pink-lipped sea-shells.

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It was a vast, glorious inheritance, this that belonged to the proud, wealthy Roscoes for many a past generation, and fair Crystel Roscoe, while gazing upon the beauties of the old ancestral home, felt her heart beat anew, as she remembered *she* was a Roscoe.

And a fit representative she was; with her aristocratic beauty of face and form, no less than of mind and heart.

As she sat thus, her white dress lying in thick, graceful negligence around her, and a scarlet silken shawl thrown over one shoulder, her beautiful dark-brown eyes resting in admiration on the fair landscape, you would have stopped to gaze again at the satin-brown hair, without ripple or wave to mar its ivory smoothness; at the earnest, honest, withal haughty eyes, that held the true Roscoe self-importance.

She *was* fair, and noble, and brave, and true, and all this nobility she had promised to Bertrand Haighte, whose Tower walls rose grim and gray, just over the sunny-bosomed river.

Bertrand Haighte! it was he of whom she was thinking, as she mutely caressed the betrothal-ring on her dainty finger; dreaming of the blissful days they had spent since he had won her, while the spring green was just blooming; wondering if the future *could* hold more of joy than the past; and trying to imagine if Mrs. Haighte, of The Towers, would be less happy than the angels.

Her sweet thoughts were bringing a scarlet bloom to her pale cheeks—Crystel was white and colorless as the Psyche over her toilet bureau; a clear, cold, elegant fairness, a birth-right to the Roscoes—and she started suddenly as the distinct sounds of a galloping horse's feet came echoing up the entrance avenue from the the road. She thought it might be Bertrand, and she sprung to her feet, the light of love's welcoming in her eyes.

It was not Bertrand, nor was it any one Crystel had ever seen before; and she stood astonished to see the stranger riding up to the foot of the high marble flight of steps.

It was a woman—or rather a girl, of nineteen or twenty, perhaps. A dark, magnificent woman, whose midnight hair hung to her waist in a succession of loose, heavy curls.

Her eyes were large, haughty in their expression, and dark as a thunder-cloud; and somehow, as Crystel stood watching the stranger dismount, her scarlet shawl flung gracefully over her shoulder, her slight form drawn up in surprise, she associated those wondrous, flashing eyes, as, for a moment, they rested full on her, with a lightning-charged storm-cloud, which, at a moment's warning, would spread instant desolation around.

She thought that, then forgot it in her surprise.

Very self-possessed the stranger ascended the steps, and bowed to Crystel.

"This is Miss Roscoe, I think?"

"I am Miss Crystel. My sister is not at home."

"Miss Crystel I wish to see. I was not aware there was an elder child."

She paused and looked keenly at Crystel, who, in her most frigid tones, addressed her:

"I can not imagine what you wish of either Hellice—Miss Roscoe—or myself."

The lady drew near her, and fixed her flashing eyes upon her.

"I am as well aware as yourself that you consider me an intruder; perhaps I am; perhaps you will regard me your best friend one day, strange as my introduction to you is. I came to see *you*, Miss Crystel, on solemnly important business. May I ask you to invite me within?"

She spoke with a courtly grace that denoted her refinement and education; and as she concluded, she handed Crystel a card.

"It is my name," she said, briefly.

Crystel read the address. It was a name she had never heard before, nor was ever likely to forget, so unique and melodious was it:

"UNDINE DEL ROSE."

"I have never heard of you, Miss Del Rose. There surely must be a mistake. There are never visitors at Edenwilde except invited guests or friends."

She was as freezing as an iceberg, but the stranger did not resent the remark.

"As I said, I desire to see *you*, Miss Crystel Roscoe, and as you do not deign to extend to me even the slightest courtesies of hospitality, let me at once inform you why I am here. Miss Crystel, you are engaged to be married to Bertrand Haighte?"

Crystel flushed indignantly at the sudden question, asked so sharply.

"I can't see that it interests you, Miss Del Rose."

"But it does. I have come to Edenwilde to ascertain if the rumor be true; because, *if* it be true—"

She paused, fixing her penetrating eyes on Crystel's sweet face.

"And if it be?"

Miss Roscoe asked it haughtily.

"Then my mission will be one of bitter woe-fulness to *you*, Miss Crystel."

A sudden throb of the heart told her this strange woman's visit was an omen; a sickening shiver came over her, that the bright eyes opposite to her did not fail to see.

"Will you tell me? I *must* know, even if I ride to The Towers and have it from his own lips."

"I see no reason for your troubling Mr. Haighte. I also know of no reason why I should deny that which is an honor to me, or would be to any woman. Yes, Miss Del Rose, I am betrothed to Bertrand Haighte. I wear this ring, that he gave me; and one month from to-day sees me his bride."

Crystel spoke quietly, haughtily, and then turned away, as if, all the required information being given, she deemed herself at liberty to withdraw.

A deathly ashiness overspread Undine Del

Rose's dark face, as she reached forth her hands toward the pale, frightened girl.

"Oh, has he dared? *has he dared?* Miss Crystel, he *dare* not marry you, he dare not marry any one—oh, God! forgive him that he has cast this blight over your young life! And yet, oh, my poor Miss Crystel, thank Him you are spared the horror of becoming his wife—oh, the *awful*, terrible words, BERTRAND HAIGHTE'S wife!"

As she finished speaking, she bowed her head on her hands, while Crystel stood, like a statue, staring at her.

"Explain yourself! Remember Mr. Haighte is very near and dear to me, and that whatever you say to injure *him*, hurts *me* as well. Remember he occupies a position of influence and trust, and is known throughout the State for a noble, upright gentleman. Remember I know him intimately, better than you can."

She had regained her composure, and her brown eyes were steadily regarding the handsome, passionate face before her.

"Better than—"

The stranger checked herself, then began, almost fiercely:

"I tell you he *dare* not, he *can* not, he *SHALL* not make you his wife! Before high Heaven I swear you shall never stand at the altar as Bertrand Haighte's wife!"

"Such language betrays your purpose, woman. At first I thought you a lady, for your language and gentle demeanor seemed to declare so. I was startled by your boldness and troubled at your words. But now, Undine Del Rose, whoever or whatever you are, I fear you no longer. Such foolish words belong to but idiots—or jealous women!"

Crystel drew her shawl more closely around her; but the stranger grew more excited at her coolness.

"I—I an idiot? I jealous of *him*! Oh, would I might speak the secret that is locked *here*."

She struck wildly against her breast.

"I am not anxious to know your secrets. I wish to be excused now."

Crystel bowed.

"One moment, I beg, while I tell you to prove me—prove me! Go tell your betrothed husband Undine Del Rose was here, and he'll ask who she is! But tell him these three words—whisper them in the ear of the man who, though not bound by word or deed to any living woman but yourself, the man, who, though free as the air he breathes, *dare* not marry you. Crystel Roscoe, whisper to him, I say, these words—and by the way he hears them, judge for yourself. But, if the world stands, and you live, you'll never see the day that calls you Bertrand Haighte's wife!"

She leaned over, and murmured the fatal test words in Crystel's ear. Then, with no further adieu, rode away as she had come.

Crystel watched the flying figure, and noted that it took the direction of The Towers.

She sat down on the rustic settee, her heart fluttering, her thoughts wild and unsettled.

What did it all mean? Who was this mysterious "Undine Del Rose," with her ominous news, her tragic oath? What did she know of Bertrand Haighte?

But, despite her brave putting of the questions to herself, her heart was sinking with fright and nervous alarm; and she grew chillier than the cold evening air alone made her. So she wrapped her shawl more tightly about her, and still sat, waiting and thinking; the while those three significant words kept ringing in her ears. Bertrand was bound to no one, yet was not at liberty to marry!

It was strange, at least; and passing bold in this witch-faced, elfin-locked Undine Del Rose, if nothing more!

Carriage-wheels were approaching, and Crystel arose to greet her sister and father on their return from the city.

"Why, Cryssie, you're looking paler than usual, a sort of scared pale. Has any thing occurred?"

General Roscoe, a fine, gray-headed, portly old gentleman, drew his youngest born to his side.

She tried to smile.

"A little lonely, papa, that is all. I expected Bertrand, but he did not come."

"And we just passed a lady riding up the avenue to The Towers. A glorious face, dark and witching as an elf's. Hellice, my dear, shall I assist you?"

A tall, graceful woman, not unlike Crystel's self, came up the broad marble steps, loaded with wee packages.

"Oh, these tormenting bridal favors, Crystel! Papa fairly scolded me to-day at Stewart's, while I was deciding between white plush or blue velvet buttons for your *robe de chambre*."

Her merry laugh struck a strange chill to her sister's heart. Already the name of bridal favors sent a sickening shiver over her.

"Then, there were the kids. I selected a dozen boxes, Crystel, and papa whispered to me, did you never wear your hands uncovered after you were to be married?"

Crystel tried to laugh, but her eyes betrayed to the loving sister the fact of some griefs; and, unloading the parcels, she went up to Crystel, with all the decisiveness of her character.

"Look you, Crystel, in my eyes. I see that something has grieved you; you will tell me?"

And then she poured her strange story in Hellice's ear.

Hellice Roscoe was not a woman who would laugh at such a story; nor would she seek to hide any trouble she herself felt. She was straightforward, honest, brave-hearted; a woman to fight a difficulty rather than go around and avoid it.

So now, when Crystel sat watching and waiting for the words that were coming—and Hellice was her oracle—Hellice was looking down in her sister's eyes, with a sad, pitying light in her own.

"Crystel, child, there must be some sort of a foundation to warrant this stranger's assertions. What it may be, we must find out. Your first duty toward proving her a fraud or a truth is, to faithfully repeat what you have told me to Bertrand. There, he is coming up the front stairs now."

CHAPTER II.

STRICKEN.

HE was a young man, was Bertrand Haighte, with a merry, joyous light in his eyes, and a quick, firm spring in his tread as he walked; a tall, well-built young fellow, with square shoulders, proud head, and graceful bearing.

As he came lightly up the flight of marble steps Crystel looked down from her window on him with feelings that were strangers to her heart; a vague fear for their future, a distrust of the present, and withal, a yearning tenderness in her soul for him who *might* never be hers.

These thoughts it was that lent the shadow to her rare brown eyes, and her lover noted it instantly.

"Crystel, darling, what cruel elf has been painting these shades on that sweet face? Can it not be exorcised by my superior power, think you?"

Bertrand lifted her chin, and kissed her ripe, red lips; and she smiled up in his merry blue eyes; but it was a wanlike smile.

Her lover gazed earnestly at her; then his own face became graver.

"Something is the matter, Crystel. Come, tell me."

With a playful show of authority, he drew her to the sofa, and then sat down himself, holding her cold little hands.

"Come now, pet, and let me hear what occasions this cloud, be it trivial or important. I can promise my sympathy and aid."

How noble he was when he spoke so tender and yet so like a strong, proud man!

"I am sure of your sympathy always, Bertrand, dear, even as I desire you shall ever rest assured of my unchanging love for you, *come what will*."

Crystel trembled a little as the words left her lips, and she snatched a quick glance at her lover's face, on which was written surprise and bewilderment.

"Come what will? Why, my little girl, what is coming? Any thing to warrant your warning me beforehand?"

"Bertrand, I will tell you."

Crystel laid her two hands, clasped, in a dimpled embrace, on young Haighte's knee; she looked full in his wondering, loving eyes, and then told him:

"Bertrand, there came a woman, or I rather should call her a young girl, dark, passionate, splendid, to Edenwilde, to-day. She gave her name as Undine Del Rose."

Crystel paused, watching him narrowly, the while, so thankful that he only seemed surprised, not conscious. And yet, did not the young girl say nothing would move him until she mentioned the three test words?

She grew flushed with excitement as she went on.

"This young girl came purposely to see me, Bertrand, to warn me, dear, against, who do you think?"

She was looking wistfully at him.

"I never could guess, darling, unless it were scapegrace I? Am I right?"

He laughed gayly; Crystel's face grew graver.

"Bertrand, you have spoken in jest the truth

that is troubling me. She *did* tell me you *dared* not, *COULD* not, *SHOULD* not ever call me your wife."

Crystel's eyes began to moisten, and her lips trembled; it was a relief to see Bertrand spring from the sofa, his cheeks flushing, his eyes gleaming in anger. But, like a dead weight on her heart lay the fact, she had not yet applied her test.

"It is a disgraceful attempt to blackmail me, my bird, Crystel; but a pitiful, miserable attempt, as this adventuress shall prove to her sorrow. Did she say more, Crystel? No wonder you looked gloomy, you poor little darling!"

Her heart throbbed wildly as he put his arms around her waist. Perhaps it might be for the last time; for, when she should have told him the message Undine Del Rose left, and he should, by his agitation, demonstrate his guilt, whatever it was—and guilt it must be that would raise a barrier between them—then all would be over forever. *Forever!* the thought of the word froze the syllables that she strove to form on her lips. She made a mighty effort; she would know her lover's truth or falsity; she would throw the die that should decide her future happiness or despair.

"Bertrand, she bade me say to you, 'FLORIAN STILL LIVES.'"

Crystel's heart stood still one awful second of suspense; then a cold, horrible calm of utter desolation settled over her, for Bertrand sprung from her side as if shot.

"Good Heavens! what demon of perdition dared whisper those accursed words into your ears? Crystel, oh, Crystel, don't look so at me! Believe me, believe me, it means nothing to alarm you!"

He lifted her cold hand to his hot, flushed cheek.

"Don't, Bertrand—oh, don't. She said it would prove you—oh, Bertrand, *why* did you ever learn me to love you so?"

Her piteous question came feebly to his ears.

"Because I wanted you so, my darling; because you *shall* be my wife despite this croaking raven, who dares shadow you with her vile evilness."

"But '*Florian*'—Bertrand, who is Florian?"

Crystel's eyes were fixed piercingly on him now; and she saw a hot flush mount to his forehead.

"I can not explain; Crystel, I never dreamed you would hear of this; I never thought to have our blessedness crushed in this foul way. Crystel, my little betrothed bride, only listen, only trust to me, only tell me you believe in me, and not in this stranger."

He clasped her tightly in his passionate arms.

"But you must unravel it; this new, awful mystery, that has broken my heart already. Won't you tell me who this '*Florian*' is?"

Bertrand shook his head gloomily.

"I can not; I dare not. Crystel, there *is* a secret, a terrible, darkly-terrible secret that never should have come to your ears. But, my darling, I ask you to have faith in me that I am true to you, that I love you. Won't you?"

"But she said you *should* never marry me."

His face darkened.

"You said she was dark, elegant?"

Crystel nodded vaguely.

For several minutes Bertrand stood in deepest meditation; gradually he grew pale, and then stern. He took Crystel's nerveless hand in his own, and looked down in her tearful eyes.

"Undine Del Rose was right. Florian does live, and I therefore return you your plighted troth. Crystel Roscoe, God in Heaven alone knows the agony in my heart; He alone knows the tenderness I dare not utter; and he only will unravel this mystery that my lips have solemnly sworn never to reveal. If I have sinned against *you*, Crystel Roscoe, I never meant it; I alone have sinned, and would that I alone might suffer."

He raised her hand to his lips and bowed reverently before he turned away.

At the door he paused and looked backward; then sprung vehemently to his betrothed's side.

"Oh, Crystel, Crystel, my darling, my poor, precious darling! My heart is crushed within me at this sudden news. I never dreamed my past would rise up and blast my future; but, Crystel, before I go, let me swear I never loved but you, that you are the only woman who ever heard a love-word from me! Tell me just once, my darling, that you love me!"

She was leaning against the mantle, trembling and white as its marble; her tears were spent, and her voice had a strange calmness that was far more terrible than the most passionate abandon of grief.

"Bertrand, the cloud is upon me; it will never be lifted this side eternity's shores; but, Bertrand, dearer than life, stronger than death, is my love for you. Go, now—good-by!"

And thus they parted, they whose very souls had merged into one; and the world went on, and the flowers bloomed, and the sun shone.

And Bertrand Haighte and Crystel Roscoe wondered at the inscrutable providence of their Creator!

CHAPTER III.

AT THE TOWERS.

THE setting sun was shining redly over the high, gloomy turrets and flaming against the tiny diamond-paned casements; the vale below, where Edenwilde lay, was draped in the soft, sweet dusk that follows the sunset, while high up on those peaked hills the glowing glories were still visible.

The Towers was a grand old place, brown with age, of storied fable and eyrie renown. Legends had it that a half-dozen generations before the present heir, when young Lord Oscar Haighte fled from his fatherland, because of the human blood that stained his guilty hands, he had bought this grand old place, then lying idly vacant on account of wild rumors afloat that inhabitants of another world had made it their home.

Just suited to his fierce, fearless nature, was this ill-starred Castle Cavnoch to young Lord Oscar, and, in gloomy silence, he and his meek-eyed young wife (whose sad, haunting face was pitied long after she was laid to her last slumber) and their three children, took up their abode at "The Towers," as the owner preferred to call it.

At Lord Oscar's death, a paper, closely written and imposingly sealed, was left to his oldest son, Egbert, who, after swearing to obey its instructions, was permitted to learn what those instructions were.

All his life was devoted to the duty imposed upon him, while the paper, bearing his added signature, was reserved to his oldest son and heir. Thus had the mysterious document been handed, so ran the legend, through seven successive generations, until, when our story opens, it was in the possession of Bertrand Haighte, the present master of The Towers.

Though born of English aristocracy, the young man, as had his father and grandfather, dropped the title to their name, and adopted the prevalent American mode of address and courtesy.

On his twenty-first birthday, a time only three years earlier, Bertrand Haighte had read the letter written by the fingers that had so long ago returned to their mother dust.

It is true, there was a certain air of romance lingering about this family relic, not to say an atmosphere of mysterious solemnity; yet, perhaps, because in these unromantic, matter-of-fact later years of ours, when ghosts and goblins, deeds of chivalry, and knights of gallant renown, are but storied fables, Bertrand Haighte seemed to care little about the entailed letter that was as much his as The Towers itself. He had sworn to it, to be sure, because he knew he had to, or else lose his expected possession; he had a vague sort of idea that it was only a trifling journey to perform, or a deed to do, that the original Lord Haighte had left undone.

So, after reading it, it was with speechless surprise he learned the value of his oath; and for twenty-four hours after that memorable birth-night, young Haighte had walked the floor of his library in a restless agony of sorrow, anger and terror.

Gradually he grew calmer, as the days wore on; then he became accustomed to thinking of the awful birthright; and, by the time he had seen pretty Crystel Roscoe, on her return from college, he was prepared to despise the warning of that letter—forget its injunctions in the fascinations of his sweetheart's grace and beauty.

And the result—we have seen it.

Bertrand Haighte was galloping up the steep bridle-path that led, on one side, to The Towers, after he had left Edenwilde and Crystel. Those horrible words, so simple to a stranger's ear, were fraught with a mysticism and terror to him, for they were the words written years and years ago by Oscar Haighte's hand:

"FLORIAN STILL LIVES!"

They were the words told to Crystel, who had whispered them, in an agony of doubt and fear, to him.

No wonder he had paled and flushed with emotion, for those words, from the lips of one who never had heard of his ancestor's strange letter—her, who was, above all women, to be mistress of The Towers—at once filled him with keenest agony and greatest alarm. They were the very words that closed the letter that lay, yellow with age, at the old stone Towers; by those words was a Haighte to be warned if he

forgot his oath, or dared violate it; by them was he to know there was no possible escape to happiness or prosperity, except on the terms laid down and signed by so many of the long-dead Haightes.

Of all this was young Bertrand thinking, as he dashed recklessly along, the fresh wind from off the water blowing over his hot, flushed face. At the outer gate, he sprung from his horse, and threw the reins to a waiting groom; entered the grand front entrance, and proceeded to the library.

It was very unlike what one would expect to find at The Towers, after seeing the solemn, silent building from without, where not a sacrilegious hand had touched a stone since the days when the drawbridge and armor-hall had been two of the features of the estate.

A long, light room, looking front on the sloping meadow-land that surrounded the house for several acres; to the side, on the sides of the hills, and the river flowing below, a carpet of light, bright emerald velvet covered the floor; a large oval table, scattered over with books and papers; easy-chairs, upholstered in green leather, and shelves filled with a choice, costly selection of works of every description; poetical, historical, political, religious.

Into this apartment (which was often used as a reception-room during the summer, while the family—consisting of Bertrand's mother and sisters, with their servants—was at the fashionable watering-place, and who had not yet returned) Bertrand went, agitated and grief-stricken.

At the threshold he paused in amazement; then, recollecting himself, removed his hat courteously and bowed; for it was a lady, leaning carelessly against the open window, that had surprised him.

She immediately came forward in a peculiarly graceful manner.

"This is Mr. Bertrand Haighte, of The Towers?"

Her voice was wonderfully liquid and melodious, and he could not avoid noticing the dark, passionate gleam in her eyes.

"I am Bertrand Haighte. How can I serve you, madam?"

"Miss, if you please, sir. I am Miss Del Rose, of New York."

She spoke slowly, significantly. The blood receded from his face, and he stared blankly at her.

"And *you* are the destroyer sent to crush my very life! *You* have been to *her*, and blasted all her hopes! and all for a silly fable!"

He was looking sternly at her, his angry eyes shining like sheet-lightning.

"No, Mr. Haighte. I am the agent of one whose law I can not evade. Like yourself, I am bound by an oath; unlike yourself, I am not disposed to violate it. *I have* seen Crystel Roscoe; I have warned her. I now seek *you*, Bertrand Haighte, to warn you."

Her intensely-brilliant eyes were reading his inmost soul; he felt himself growing helpless under the insufferable glare.

"You have no reason to do so, Miss Del Rose. I am acting as I ever intend doing, entirely at my own discretion. Permit me to have refreshments offered, while you excuse me."

He would have bowed himself away, but she laid her tiny hand on his sleeve.

"No, Mr. Haighte, not till I have given you the counsel I came to give; not till I have begged you to remember the solemn words of the letter handed you from the grave; not till I remind you that the closing words of it are true; that *Florian still lives*; lives to avenge her wrongs; lives to punish you for violating your oath."

"But how do *you* know the words of this letter, that mortal eye save the oldest son of the Haightes never read?"

A strangely sweet smile came to her eyes.

"Because I am one of them you have sworn to sweep from the face of the earth!"

There was no tremor in her tones, no glimmer of the steady eyes.

Bertrand groaned.

"The accursed oath—would I had torn it into a million of shreds, and braved the consequences!"

"Mr. Haighte, I, Undine Del Rose, and you, are sworn enemies according to the letter. *Shall* we be?"

Those wondrous eyes were letting the long lashes curl over their darkling depths, and the voice was modulated to exquisite lowness.

"Who are you—tell me?"

"A descendant of the victim of Lord Oscar Haighte's hand; the only living representative. And my life you have sworn to take. It is in your power now. But I am not afraid. *Shall* we be enemies hereafter, or friends?"

She extended her hand and looked earnestly at him.

"Woe comes to the Haightes if they but touch the hand of one of you. You have broken the tie between me and my only one; why should I be your friend?"

"I will tell you why. Because I wear this jewel; the jewel the letter spoke of; the jewel the letter commands shall be a sign of peace whenever it comes; the jewel that the Lord of Haighte gave his victim once, then stole from his dead body. By this token, I demand your friendship."

She held up her finger and the glittering green and red veined stone that adorned it.

Bertrand rubbed his eyes in bewilderment. She had spoken the truth. But, how had she obtained it, that had been lost these fifty years? He dared not ask.

"Undine Del Rose, you have conquered. I yield; your friend."

He took her hand, warm and throbbing, in his own, so cold and damp.

Thus they sealed the compact, and the beautiful girl rode away, a smile of strange triumph on her passionate lips; and a light that was darkly ominous shone in her eyes as she looked down on lovely Edenwilde lying amid the darkening shadows.

CHAPTER IV.

A BOLD RESOLVE.

A LONELY country roadside at the gloaming, is perhaps not the most pleasant place to ride by one's self, particularly if that same lonesome self be a young, pretty girl, as young and pretty

as Undine Del Rose, who, with her eyes glowing like twin stars, and her round, dusky cheeks flushing with a rich, scarlet bloom, was dashing along toward the railway station. Her good fortune had exceeded her wildest dreams; that she should compel proud Bertrand Haighte to take her hand in friendship at the very first interview, was news enough to make her heart beat joyously; as joyously it did beat, as she hastened on.

At the railway depot she returned the horse she had hired, purchased a ticket for New York, and then, as if impatient of quiet restfulness, paced to and fro on the long, deserted platform.

On her pretty hand shone the curious jewel, whose vivid scarlet veins reminded one of living blood, and Undine Del Rose caressed it with a sort of horrible triumph. A few moments later and the long train came thundering on; halted a second, took this handsome dark girl, and a half-dozen other passengers, and then went speeding along again, now under dark tunnels, now out into the shimmering starlight; always winding, like a huge serpent of fire, along the soft-flowing Hudson.

It had told nine o'clock by Undine's tiny little Geneva watch, as she alighted at the city terminus, and looked, half inquiringly, half expectantly about her.

A gentleman, dressed in the prevailing style, of engaging manners and fine appearance, came forward to meet her.

"Undine, I was afraid you would be unable to catch the train. I've been so longing to see you. It seems an age since this morning."

Undine's face darkened, and she ignored the extended hand.

"It seems to me *you* are ever the one I am compelled to be welcomed by. Where is the carriage?"

The fair blonde face flushed at the words.

"Undine, my darling, *do not speak so. Remember—*"

"I remember but one thing, and that is, I detest you more thoroughly after this visit I've paid than I ever did before."

Her eyes sparkled like beads of jet under a brilliant lamplight, as they thus exchanged salutations in a low, whispering monotone.

"Here is the carriage, Undine. Mrs. St. Havens sent it."

Perhaps Undine Del Rose did not notice it, in her haughty wrath, but Clifford Temple's voice was cold and careless when he spoke; but she certainly *did* observe that he never offered his hand, as was his wont delightedly to do, as she stepped into the brougham.

"Your manners seem to have flown with your welcome."

Undine glanced sideways at him, never fearing but that a few pet words from her could drive away the shadows from his face, as she had done a dozen times before.

But to-night Undine Del Rose had spoken careless words that had estranged a heart that loved her. And how often do we do the very selfsame thing!

It was with a new sensation—one of curiosity to know what to make of this strange disposition on Clifford Temple's part, and of fear lest

she had really destroyed the love she had thought to trifle with—that Undine Del Rose leaned back in the satin cushions of Mrs. St. Havens's elegant brougham, and watched her lover from under her vailing lashes.

"Is that so? I must confess that the rather cool reception I received may have served to damp them."

He just glanced at her, and Undine wondered if it would quite kill her to have Clifford Temple cease to love her? and yet, woven into the woof of that thought, was a remembrance of Bertrand Haighte's handsome face and courtly air.

"Perhaps you would not care to hear of my adventures since I left you yesterday morning?"

Undine spoke very indifferently, but the gentleman's cool reply was quite as careless.

"Well, I can not say that I have any particular desire to learn them. Just as you please, however. By-the-by, I just recollect an engagement at ten o'clock. You'll excuse me, Undine?"

He called to the coachman to rein in his horses at the corner, then, with a nod and a touch of his hat to Undine, he sprung out, and went up the avenue.

She gazed after him, her eyes full of wonderment; a smile of challenging triumph, as though he had not dared measure lances with her, rose to her lips, and then she leaned lazily back among the cushions, as the carriage bowled rapidly up the silent avenue.

Beyond an occasional illy-concealed smile that half displayed her little white teeth, she did not betray her thoughts during that ride home, and when the carriage stopped at the elegant mansion on Lexington avenue, she sprung out unassisted, and with a pleasant "All right, Martin," ran up the steps to the lace-curtained inner door.

A lady met her, just as she laid her hand on the silver handle—a matronly, stylish woman, with a brilliant smile, and keen, bright eyes.

She caught Undine's hand as they met.

"My dear, I am so thankful you have returned. You can't imagine how worried I have been. Come right up to my room, to warm you. Isn't it remarkably chilly for an October night?"

Undine kissed the clear white forehead.

"I am sorry you have fretted; I have had a delightful time, and found all the Halls well—Lida especially."

"But where's Mr. Temple? He left the house in the brougham."

"Mrs. St. Havens, I do not know where he is."

There was a suddenly-forced hauteur in Undine's words that attracted the lady's attention; and as they had just reached the upper landing, she turned abruptly around, and looked at the beautiful flushed face.

"Have you had another lover's quarrel? Tell me, Undine."

She laughed.

"You seem quite agitated over so trivial an affair. Yes, we have had a slight coolness, hardly a quarrel. He's altogether too devoted, Mrs. St. Havens. I told him so, and the conse-

quence was, Mr. Temple remembered an engagement *must* be attended to, and left me to my own pleasant society."

Mrs. St. Havens walked slowly into the splendid apartment she called "her room."

A large front chamber, covered with royal velvet carpeting; adorned with rich pink plush and silver furniture; decorated by *bijoux* of all kinds; all combining to form a picture that was the perfect embodiment of extreme wealth, taste and luxurious habits.

After the door had closed behind them, Mrs. St. Havens turned again to Undine, but with so strangely altered an expression on her fine features, that the girl uttered an involuntary cry.

"Heavens and earth! Mrs. St. Havens, what is the matter?"

Well might she ask, as she gazed upon the ashen white lips, the pale deathly face; the eyes, so full of tremor and dismay.

"There is nothing the matter. I am only suffering in my mind a portion of the agony you will endure if you love Clifford Temple. Undine Del Rose, beware how you trifle with him; for, besides loving you, he has you in his power. And not only you, but me, *me*, Mrs. St. Havens!"

She almost screamed the last words; and an incredulous smile slowly gathered on Undine's lips.

"Surely you are excited beyond your knowledge. Of course, you are either mistaken, or alarmed needlessly."

"I wish to Heaven I were! But I tell you, Undine Del Rose, that the day that sees you and Clifford Temple enemies witnesses— Ah, I dare not speak the horrible words! But, girl, girl! as you value your earthly happiness, as you value *my* welfare, oh, be careful how you offend him!"

Pale from agitation, Mrs. St. Havens sunk into the chair near by, while Undine stood, darklingly brilliant, defiantly beautiful, beside her.

"It may all be true. I will not doubt but you mean all you say. And yet, Mrs. St. Havens, I freely confess to you that I have ceased to care for Clifford Temple. To-day I met my destiny; the only man I ever saw whom I loved, worshiped, the moment I saw him. If he had asked me, I'd have married him on the spot."

A sudden flush flamed over Mrs. St. Havens's face.

"Oh, Undine, how can you? But you must crush it; you must forget this stranger, whoever he is. Undine, you *must* marry Clifford Temple."

Then the girl laughed; a low ripple of tantalizing melody.

"But if I love this other, this god among men—"

"You mustn't ever allow yourself to think of it. Oh, Undine, believe me; heed my warning! I never told you before, for I fondly hoped to see you united to Clifford without any knowledge of the dread secret, that never could have added to your happiness. But when I saw you come without him to-night, oh, my heart sunk within me!"

"You are not so brave as I. And if the fate

of ten million worlds hung on my decision, I would not hesitate to marry this glorious stranger, if those worlds were eternally lost therefor!"

Mrs. St. Havens buried her face in her hands, and a silence ensued, almost painful in its intensity.

"Who is this other?" she asked, hesitatingly. The answer came prompt and proud from Undine's lips.

"Bertrand Haighte, of The Towers."

"Merciful God, forbid it!"

Mrs. St. Havens sprung wildly from her chair, her eyes fairly glaring from their sockets, her fair hands beating against the air, as if to drive away the words.

"Unsay them, oh, Undine, unsay those words! Bertrand Haighte— Oh, what is *your* sin, that this awful calamity is sent upon us? That you ever went to the Halls to-day, when I might have known you would have seen him?"

With a faint wail of anguish, she slid down to the soft carpet, unconscious and still.

After Undine had summoned the maid, and seen Mrs. St. Havens at rest, she ascended the stairs to her own room; and there, with starry eyes, looked at her reflection in the mirror.

"Yes, Undine Del Rose, you are fairly started on your career of adventure! Never give up, no matter what may come, until you have accomplished the solitary object of your lonely life, to which all other aims shall bend! Never till you are the bride of Bertrand Haighte will your work be accomplished. And it *shall* be accomplished by fair means or foul, or Undine Del Rose will die in the attempt."

CHAPTER V.

LURLINE'S LOVE.

BERTRAND HAIGHTE stood, almost a petrified man, looking at, not seeing, the graceful fleeting form of the bewildering girl, as she dashed down the rocky path leading from The Towers to the main road.

The twilight was rapidly gathering, and from the windows of Edenwilde, that lay nestling so lovingly on the greensward at the foot of the hills, he saw faint, twinkling lights, now in one apartment, now in another, and at last shining like a calm beacon-light in Crystel's room.

A bitter mood was upon him, and a keen anguish was in his heart as he looked at the bright point he had so often watched in happier moments, as the signal for him to come to his love.

How the world was changed since last the soothing dusk-shadows had fallen! To-night, instead of the low, murmurous music of the Hudson as it softly laved the base of the hills, came a dull, sullen sound, as if to reprove him and discourage him. The hills, ever his glory and delight in the grand dignity of silent, solemn restfulness, now appeared to rise grimly, savagely up in the darkness, like bold, triumphant fingers pointing out his misery.

For several moments he stood in the large marble-floored rotunda, watching and wondering if all the joy of his life was gone out; then, as the bells of The Towers began to ring the hour of eight, he turned with a chilled shiver, half of cold, half of inward nervousness, and

re-entered the warm, light library where Undine Del Rose had left a faint, sweet, rare perfume lingering in the air.

With a gesture of disgust he threw up the window.

"The sooner I forget her the better! And yet, what wondrous eyes she had!"

And with the strange inconsistency of man, he took the best way of forgetting Undine Del Rose; that of brooding over her strange, witching charms.

Yet, his very heart was aching to bursting while he thought of Crystel Roscoe; and he was ever thinking of her, even while the dark eyes and crimson lips of her who had stricken them was floating before his memory's eyes.

A long, long while he sat there, his senses half-fascinated by that subtly fragrant odor that persistently lingered around him; with a tenderness, it seemed to him, and he grew angry with himself at the imaginative thought.

And while he sat there, yet grieving and striving to see light ahead for him and Crystel, he became suddenly aware that there was a delightful commotion at the door; the next moment, his grand, stately mother and haughtily elegant sister entered the library, bringing in their garments the sweet, cool freshness of the night air; and the night air on the highlands is blissful to breathe. Bertrand sprung to welcome them, an apology on his lips.

"You need to ask forgiveness, you naughty boy, for not coming to the city to meet us. If it had not been that we were carried perforce, by Mrs. Judge Temple to her residence, I should have telegraphed to you. As it was, her son accompanied us, and saw us safely on the train."

The aristocratic lady kissed her handsome boy, then sunk wearily down in a capacious arm-chair.

"Sit down, my dear; Bertrand, just close the window. I am so very fatigued. I really do not see how we would have managed had it not been for young Mr. Temple. He was very handsome, don't you think so, Lena?"

Miss Haighte carelessly twirled the rings on her finger, but a heightened color flamed for one brief second on her marble-white face, used as she was to guarding her thoughts from any one's eye.

"Yes, I think he is very handsome. He was agreeable and gentlemanly, not at all presuming in his attentions."

"That is an unusual compliment for you to pay, Lena. Perhaps Gussie will favor this stranger with a less flattering opinion!"

Bertrand laid his hand caressingly on his youngest sister's head; she was the pet of the household, and Bertrand idolized her.

She looked saucily up in his face.

"Do you suppose I am going to tell my secret impression of Mr. Clifford Temple? Not I, brother mine. I will leave that to Lurline. By the way, Bertie, how could we have neglected to inquire after Hellice Roscoe and darling little Crystel? We came home a fortnight earlier than we expected to prepare for your wedding."

A sudden cold shiver thrilled over Bertrand; he looked out at the window into the dense darkness, striving to hide the pallor he felt creeping over his face.

"She is well, Gussie *mia*. And the rest of the Roscoes, too. I was there to-day, as usual."

He spoke naturally, wondering to himself why he did not tell them the strange events of the day. Something deterred him; and he obeyed the silent impulse.

"We are going back to New York to-morrow for a couple of days," said Lena; "perhaps you and Crystel will go? She has such exquisite taste in selecting goods. The cards are not out yet, to hinder either of you."

"I certainly have no objection."

He murmured the words very indifferently, Mrs. Haighte thought, and his sisters. But they made no remarks thereon.

"Then please ride over to Edenwilde early in the morning and bring Crystel and Hellice back."

Pretty, imperious Gussie kissed her hand to her brother, and then went, singing a gay tune, up the stairs.

Mrs. Haighte followed, bidding her son good-night, leaving Lurline alone with her brother.

"I did not want to speak before them, Bertrand, but I must tell you. Oh, brother, I have met the one at last! I loved him as soon as I saw him; am I unmaidenly, Bertrand? I knew you would sympathize with me if any one would, because *you* are so happy in the love of little Crystel Roscoe."

He almost groaned, but Lurline did not perceive it.

"Unmaidenly, my stately sister! I can not imagine a Haighte, a woman of our family, being *that*. No, my dear Lena, to love is never unwomanly, provided the loved one be an idol worthy of worship. Who is this Mr. Temple?"

Somehow, as his lips uttered this name, there stole across his senses that same sweet fragrance again, and Lurline noted it.

"He carries that same perfume. Isn't it glorious? *Le Del Rose*, he called it, when I remarked its sweetness."

Bertrand started.

"Del Rose! That was her name! Strange!" Lurline's low, confidential voice broke the reverie he was falling into.

"His name is most beautiful—Clifford Temple. He is so grand and elegant; far different from the other men I have been in contact with all this long, dreary summer. I can not tell you more, save that he is the only idolized son of his widowed mother; rich and aristocratic."

Her voice mellowed down to a happy whisper; and Bertrand stooped and kissed her.

"Good-night, Lurline. Dream of him, sister dear, and if he be worthy, and love you as you love him, all will be well."

Then, after she had left him with her sweet secret, Bertrand sat, long after Undine Del Rose had made her vow to win him; long after Crystel Roscoe had extinguished her light and sobbed herself to an unquiet slumber in Hellice's true arms.

He was wondering what to say, what to do, when he went to Edenwilde on the morrow morning, as he was expected to do.

And, with Crystel's white, rounded face, and Undine's haunting eyes floating alternately before him, he sat and mused, alone with the silent midnight and his own sad thoughts.

CHAPTER VI.

THE FINAL RENUNCIATION.

THE family at Edenwilde had just arisen from the breakfast-table, as Bertrand Haighte's card was handed to Crystel.

General Roscoe had passed from the breakfast-parlor into his private study beyond, and did not see the look of unutterable agony that rushed to Crystel's face as she turned to Hellice.

"I can not see him. You will tell him, Hellice. Tell him it is cruel to come here; tell him—"

Hellice gently stopped her sister's excited speech.

"It would be far better, poor little one, that you should see him. Perhaps he can explain—perhaps that is his errand."

A sudden radiance leaped to Crystel's face, and she caught her sister's hand excitedly.

"Hellice, do you think he has come for that? oh, my heart seems stopping at the bare suggestion! What can he have ridden over for, thus early, unless it be to make it all right?"

Then darting by her sister, she almost flew into the sunny parlor, where Bertrand awaited her.

"Oh, Bertrand, tell me quickly that you have come to explain this awful mystery that is keeping us apart! Tell me, dearest, I am right!"

She wound her two clinging arms around his neck, and he felt her rapid, irregular breathing on his face. For a moment he held her in a painfully fierce embrace, then he gently held her away.

"Oh, my poor darling, my suffering, loving little one, I would to God that were my errand—"

A cry, fraught with agony, fell from her lips, and she staggered away from him to the sofa.

He followed her, yet afar off.

"My lips are sealed, Crystel. How dare I prove recreant to the trust imposed on me before my birth? Oh, my darling, my darling, won't you have mercy on me, on yourself, and let me have you for my own, regardless of this past trouble?"

"But *Florian*," she murmured, faintly.

A fierce pang reminded him of it. True, there was Florian. In the excitement of seeing her, and the witchery that Undine Del Rose had cast about him, he had forgotten why he dared not marry her; forgotten the very cause of all his troubles.

But he remembered it now, with renewed sorrow.

"I would I had died before to-day," he exclaimed, passionately, pacing to and fro, and gazing upon Crystel's bowed head.

"No; live to avert this shadowing sorrow. Mr. Haighte, am I intruding?"

It was Hellice Roscoe's sweet, womanly voice; a voice whose very sound inspired one with courage. He grasped her hands vehemently.

"If I might set us all right, I'd live a hundred years in the loneliest dungeon at The Towers. Oh, Hellice, sister Hellice, I am afraid she will die, and all because I have dared love her."

"That is wrong, Bertrand. You love Crystel; she loves you—nay, my sister, do not raise your head so imploringly for me to cease; let me do what I believe to be my duty. Let us all do our duty, and God will see to the issue. Yes, my dear Bertrand, you have loved in innocence and happiness; and now, because sudden clouds darken your landscape, and unseen chasms debar your progress, you must not sit down and grieve."

"And what can I do? All the efforts mortal man can put forth will not undo the past."

Hellice smiled.

"I have thought this mysterious affair all over. Last night in the silence and darkness, I watched the glimmer of light in the library windows at The Towers, and decided that it was wrong to allow such grief to kill you and her, without making an honest effort to remove it. I, for one, dear Bertrand, am willing to help you. May I?"

The young man looked at her in a sort of bewildered pity.

"Have you any idea of what you are to do?"

"Not now. But, can not your mother, when she learns this family secret from you, be able—"

Bertrand sprung to his feet.

"Tell a *female* the contents of that letter I swore never to reveal? that no mortal ear, save the oldest son, and the executor of the estate, ever heard since there existed a Haighte? Hellice, that were an impossibility. That would bring down on my mother's head an awful curse."

Hellice looked seriously at him.

"I may be wrong, but I think, were I you, for love's sake, I'd risk it."

She smiled kindly at him, then withdrew from the room.

Neither spoke for several minutes; then it was Crystel who broke the oppressive silence.

"Bertrand, I have but one favor to ask of you. Will you grant it? Promise me, on your solemn word."

She laid her white, trembling hand on his arm.

"I'll swear to anything you ask, my darling."

"Then *please* don't come to Edenwilde any more. Oh, Bertrand, I see plainly I must give you up. I must steel my heart to my fate, Bertrand. I never will accept your hand, even if you explain this mystery; because if, by doing so, you bring a curse on your mother, what pleasure would such a dearly-bought privilege bring us? No, Bertrand, your first love, your best allegiance, is to your mother. I can suffer for *you*, my darling, if not *with* you. Now, Bertrand, you see I am strong and brave; please say good-by, just as any friend would do, and then go away. I will explain to papa; you to Mrs. Haighte, and Lurline, and Gussie."

She was trembling from head to foot, despite her pitiful attempt to appear composed, and her lover gazed at her, his heart throbbing madly.

He suddenly caught her in his arms, and pressed hot kisses on her pale face, her quivering lips; then, as if he feared his own violence might frighten her, he reverently laid his hands on her fair head.

"I have sworn, my darling; and because a

Haighte never yet was false to his word, is the reason why I this day give you up, forever and forever!"

There was no haste in his movement as he departed; he seemed suddenly petrified. He felt no sorrow, no regret, no disquiet, only this horrible stillness that was not restfulness, this painful calmness that was not resignation.

So he went home, and met Gussie on the front lawn.

"Is she coming? Where's Hellice and Crystel?"

Then he remembered why he had gone to Edenwilde.

"Oh, it is impossible for them to leave home to-day."

Gussie's pretty face clouded.

"Never mind, sister *mia*. I'll go, and that's next best, isn't it?"

Again he locked the news between his lips that must be told soon. But he thought of the two days that were as days of grace to him, before his family would be compelled to learn the truth; and he decided to wait until their return to The Towers again.

If he had but spoken! if he had but known, but thought! In after days he remembered it, and wondered why he was permitted to follow his own way.

CHAPTER VII.

ONE DAY.

BERTRAND HAIGHTE tried in vain to analyze his feelings as he rode along in the swift flying train that morning with his beautiful sisters and stately mother.

Lurline and Gussie were chatting away on some light, joyous subject; Lena, with her sweet, grave face irradiated with a delicate scarlet bloom as they neared the place where she would see the one she had so suddenly learned to love.

Bertrand's thoughts puzzled him. First, he was alarmed to find how vividly those witching, liquid eyes seemed ever peering into his own; he was ashamed that his heart was not broken because of Crystel Roscoe; he wondered if Clifford Temple and *Le Del Rose* and Undine, were any way connected; and, finally, he could not understand how it was that his mother and sisters were on their way to purchase articles for his marriage, when the bride-elect was no more to him than any stranger.

Then, by some curious lightning speed of reasoning, he thought perhaps, after all, he would see the splendid girl who held such a romantic hold on him; he might love her—he blushed at the audacity of his unspoken thoughts—Crystel refused to marry him; the wedding might still be, with a change of brides!

And as the long train steamed into the depot, he sprung from his seat, vexed and mortified that he had given such free rein to his imagination.

"We are to drive to Mrs. Temple's. We promised her this visit."

And so they rode straight on to their fate—Bertrand Haighte and Lurline!

Mrs. Temple met the party in her elegant reception-saloon.

"I am delighted to meet your son, Mrs. Haighte," she said, as Bertrand was presented. "I am sure my boy, Clifford, will be pleased to meet him. And now, after lunch, we will go on a shopping tour; then call on Mrs. St. Havens, then through the Boulevard home to dinner; after that to hear Nilsson. Is my programme agreeable?"

An answer was prevented by the entrance of a gentleman.

Mrs. Temple arose.

"This is my son, Mr. Clifford, Mr. Haighte."

Temple advanced to exchange greetings, and Bertrand instantly detected that same sweet, nameless fragrance that Undine had left after her. He longed to ask him, but pride forbade.

All that afternoon, while Lurline was so perfectly happy in the society of Clifford, Bertrand was restlessly watching every passing stage and carriage for a glimpse of that radiant, flushed face. Several times Clifford rallied him on his abstractedness, but Gussie always excused him.

"He is lonely away from his betrothed, Mr. Temple. Wouldn't you be perfectly disconsolate?"

"If the lady were so charming as yourselves, I would certainly suffer terribly."

And while Gussie was laughing so merrily, Temple would steal a glance at Lurline that made her cheeks bloom gloriously.

"And now for Mrs. St. Havens."

They drove up, and Bertrand alighted, little thinking he was to meet his fate within those walls.

The footman announced that the lady in question was not at home, but that Miss Undine Del Rose was in.

Bertrand's listless ears caught the sound, and his heart leaped to his throat.

Mrs. Temple turned to Mrs. Haighte.

"We need not go in, then?"

Bertrand interposed, with apparently indifferent manner, but wildly-throbbing heart.

"Perhaps Lena and Gussie are fatigued riding and wish to alight."

But Lurline was only too happy to sit there on the carriage seat forever, with Clifford Temple beside her; she did not say so, however, but implied her present comfort. Gussie was in an impatient mood for the Boulevard, so Bertrand could do no more than glance at the house, take its number, and be driven away. And, during these five minutes of debate, Undine Del Rose was peeping from behind the lace curtains of her own room, with flashing eyes, and triumphant smile; her proud heart beating as it was seldom wont to beat, as she looked down on the man she already worshiped so madly.

As the carriage drove away she drew a long breath of relief.

"What can be more fortunate than that Mrs. St. Havens is from home? If she had seen Bertrand, what might have happened?"

She was leaning against the snowy-white rep of her lounging chair, and her scarlet-stained cheeks, and jetty hair, streaming over neck and rounded bosom; her glowing, sparkling eyes, made a rare, orientally warm, picture.

"He has come to me; he must learn to love, be the result what it may. He will come again, I feel sure; to-night, I think. The fates favor

me, for Mrs. St. Havens will be absent till Saturday. Oh, Bertrand Haighte, I'd sell my very soul for your love—such love as I feel for you?"

It had gradually grown dusky, as she sat there, her dark, passionate eyes partly veiled by their heavy lashes, her small hands, as perfect as nature ever molded, crossed on her breast, in an attitude of exquisite, dreamy reverie.

Presently she arose, and lighted the gas; then rung for her maid to arrange her toilet.

Confident in her expectation of meeting Bertrand Haighte, and conscious of her beauty, as also her determination to lay siege to his heart, she selected her most becoming dress.

It was a black grenadine, full of shimmering waves of darkness; her beautiful neck and arms shone through the gossamer covering, and a heavy golden chain and cross was clasped about the round throat.

Her hair was dressed as she invariably wore it; floating like a cloud down to her slender waist, and tied with a glowing scarlet ribbon. She was magnificent as she stood before the pier glass, and adjusted the broad, scarlet silken sash; and as she heard the door-bell ring, a brilliant smile hovered on her lips. She listened to his footsteps as he entered the parlor; then, after several seconds of silent waiting, she went in, bewildering, glorious in her dark, tropical beauty.

"Mr. Haighte! I am so surprised, so delighted!"

She went to him, both hands extended.

He arose, his senses dazzled; his heart throbbing, and took her hands, not relinquishing them.

"And I am the happiest of all men to be welcomed by so lovely a charmer."

He led her to the sofa, and then let go his hold of her hands.

"I called this afternoon with Mr. Temple, but Mrs. Temple and the other ladies concluded to await the return of Mrs. St. Havens."

He looked down at her expressive face; suddenly she raised her eyes.

"I saw you, Mr. Haighte. I knew you would come again."

He had fully intended watching to see if she betrayed any especial knowledge of young Temple; but her answer thrilled him with so delightful a sensation that he forgot it.

"And why did you know it, Undine Del Rose?"

"No, call me Undine, please, and I will tell you."

He caressed the shapely fingers that were lying so temptingly near his own.

"Then, Undine, why did you know I would come?"

Her hand trembled, and he knew it; and he realized how infatuated he was becoming, yet he wooed the temptation.

"Because I wanted to see you so. I thought surely your heart would tell you."

She smiled in his eyes that same smile that had haunted him ever since that first time.

"It did tell me, Undine, my beautiful one. And now I am here, to see you, to hear you speak, to—"

He almost said "to love you."

"And you do not quite hate me for the part my

duty compelled me to play! Oh, Mr. Haighte, I was so afraid you'd despise me."

He slipped his arm around her waist.

"Despise you, Undine? How can you say it, when I've thought but of you since I saw you? Undine, you beautiful temptress, do you know you are making the veriest slave of me?"

He was toying with the soft hair that floated across his lips.

"Oh, Mr. Haighte, I would not do that, I'm sure. But I'm so glad you like me."

She looked so tenderly at him, he could with difficulty refrain from snatching kisses from those proud, curved lips.

"Mr. Temple is a very agreeable host, is he not?"

She asked him the question.

"Yes, a perfect gentleman. You are great friends, I believe?"

He was half-jealous already, lest it might be more than friendship.

Undine arched her brow with a pretty, impatient gesture.

"Y-e-s. That is, Clifford and Mrs. St. Havens are—Mrs. St. Havens is my lady bountiful, you know; I am a mere charity dependent; one of her *freaks* I imagine—I think she means to marry him one day, in fact, I know it."

How carelessly she told it to him, and when he arose to bid her good-night, he felt so relieved; and yet—poor Lurline!

"You'll come again?"

She laid her hand on his arm.

"Will you ride with me to the Park in the morning?"

"I should be delighted. Then I will say good-night."

She smiled as she spoke, but Bertrand laughingly took her hand and drew her to his side.

"Let me kiss you, Undine. May I?"

She flushed deliciously; then a sudden dignity came to her, for she loved this man.

"Not yet, Mr. Haighte—*Bertrand*."

She murmured his name in a low, melodious whisper, that was music in his ears long after he sought his pillow that night.

And all this while, not a thought of Crystel Roscoe!

Poor fellow! was he really so much to blame?

CHAPTER VIII.

ANOTHER DAY.

THE elegant breakfast service on Mr. Temple's table was glittering in the broad band of sunlight that lay upon it, that frosty October morning; and with the genial warmth of the partly open register around them the sociable household were chatting gayly.

"You spirited yourself away so suddenly last night that I had no opportunity for a quiet cigar. Were you at the theater, Haighte, or out promenading? You missed a treat if you did not hear Nilsson."

Bertrand was eating his egg thoughtfully when Clifford addressed him; he started a little in surprise, and Gussie laughed.

"I do declare, Bertie, I shall make Crystel laugh heartily when we get home, by telling her of all these abstracted fits of yours."

He made an effort to join in the little ripple of laughter that went round,

"Such devotion does not often exist, even when the bridal day wants but a few weeks of its birth. I pride myself that my son is a model of constancy."

Mrs. Haighte looked proudly at her handsome boy. Little did she know how her words stabbed him!

"Apropos of how and where you spent your evening last night, Haighte. I want you to accompany me this afternoon to call on a very particular lady friend of mine. This morning we'll go to—"

"I will gladly be at your service after lunch, but before I am particularly engaged. Several property agents to look after, and some taxes to have settled."

"Oh, then, I'll meet you at Delmonico's—say two o'clock."

Lurline sat, with cold hands and hot cheeks, wondering who that lady friend of Temple's was.

As the gentlemen went out, she detained Bertrand, to whom her agitation plainly revealed her anxiety.

"Bertie, *chere*, please find if he's engaged to her."

He pressed her hand, and while he might have told her then and there that Clifford was betrothed to Mrs. St. Havens, he avoided giving her the pain he knew it must cause her.

At the front entrance they parted; Lurline to brood in suspicion, Clifford to attend to his legitimate business, and Bertrand to call a carriage and drive straight to Lexington avenue.

Undine met him at the door, more charming, if that were possible, than ever.

She had attired herself in a garnet silk carriage-dress, with a costly velvet sacque, cut low across the front, where she wore a fine lace corsage. A round hat, of garnet velvet, with a long, floating bird of Paradise; garnet kids, and heavy Etruscan gold ornaments.

That was Undine Del Rose, Mrs. St. Havens's charity dependent!

All that long ride, she wove her chains more tightly about him; his senses were intoxicated by her bewildering beauty, and when they alighted, just in time for Bertrand to meet Temple at the appointed hour, he had decided to offer her his heart, hand and fortune before the night closed upon them.

"You'll reserve to-night for me, Undine? I want to see you particularly. You can guess what I wish to say, my beautiful one, but I will not tell it to you until I see you at nine this evening."

"Of course you must come. Then *au revoir* till then."

She wafted him a kiss, then watched him away.

"It is a dangerous game; but I've begun it and I'll end it, *somehow*. If Clifford Temple tells him of our engagement—"

Her flashing eyes answered her threat.

"I see no reason why either should mention me to the other. If they should, I will elect Bertrand Haighte for my choice, and Clifford Temple may do his worst."

She was thinking these thoughts as she removed her costly wrappings.

"Perhaps Mrs. St. Havens is a monomaniac

on certain subjects; but sane or insane, there is no earthly reason why I should not marry Bertrand Haighte if I want to. Poor fellow! he has forgotten that I told him, in that first interview, that he never could marry. Well, he *shall* not, unless I am the bride!"

She suffered a glad, triumphant light to shine in her eyes; and as she stood smiling at her proud reflection, she little dreamed that the path, so easy to tread now, that opened so luckily before, was so soon to close upon her, leaving her to complete the journey as best she might.

"Now, Haighte, to see my betrothed."

Clifford announced their destination as the brougham came to the door.

"Betrothed? You are as fortunate as myself then."

"Perhaps. You see, Bertrand, I am not sure of the welcome I shall receive. My lady-love and I parted not the best of friends."

Bertrand laughed, and thought of *his* parting with his beloved, though not yet betrothed.

"These lovers' tiffs are mere bagatelles. Depend upon it, the fair one will be all smiles."

Bertrand smiled to himself as the carriage turned into Lexington avenue, and wondered what Undine would say to see him come with Clifford Temple to call on Mrs. St. Havens.

As they alighted Clifford turned to him.

"Be prepared for the most wondrous revelation of beauty you ever beheld."

"I have heard of the lady's fair face before to-day. But I fear she is from home."

"I think not. I just caught a glimpse of her as we ascended the steps."

Together they entered the same apartment Bertrand had so lately left, and that he was so soon again to visit, to ask Undine to become his wife.

He awaited with feverish impatience Mrs. St. Havens's appearance, hoping his charmer would be with her. But, to his surprise, Undine entered alone.

He glanced at her, and at sight of her could, with difficulty, repress a cry.

He rose and took her hand.

"Miss Del Rose, you are pale and agitated. Has any thing occurred to distress you?"

She stole a tender, wistful glance at him before she replied.

"Nothing, thank you, Mr. Haighte. Mr. Temple, you will not find Mrs. St. Havens at home."

She changed her voice to one of extreme frigidity as she addressed her lover.

He bowed gallantly.

"I am not desirous of seeing Mrs. St. Havens. I came to present my friend, Mr. Haighte, to my *fiancee*, but I perceive he has the pleasure of her acquaintance."

A hot flame rose to Bertrand's face.

"Miss Del Rose betrothed to *you*, Temple? I understood you were interested in the lady of the house."

He looked from Undine, who was shivering inwardly, wondering how this *was* to end, but outwardly calm and dignified, so perfect was her command of herself, to Clifford, who, with

a smile on his lips and in his eyes, seemed to enjoy the situation.

"You are mistaken, Mr. Temple, in representing me as engaged to you, when you know I never cared for you. Mr. Haighte, be so kind as to close the register? the room is too warm."

Bertrand's back was toward them a moment as he obeyed her request; and then she looked at Temple. One of those lightning glances that told him to beware how he thwarted her, that expressed the defiance she felt—the love she entertained for Bertrand.

He smiled calmly back at her flushing, passionate cheeks, and then Haighte joined them again.

He seemed to have undergone a complete revolution of feeling since he entered the house; when he stepped across the threshold it had been in the full flush of his impulsive passion for the siren who had lured him, first from happiness with Crystel Roscoe, and now from Crystel without happiness.

Of a sudden, the charm was broken, and his head grew confused and giddy as one awaking from some frightfully entrancing dream; and a long, cold thrill that quivered over him, as he drew a relieved breath, told him the spell was broken, while as by magic, Crystel's fine, sweet face rose before him.

The contrast served to complete the thankfulness of his escape, and when he turned his face toward Undine again, it was fairly radiant with the new-born thoughts. It was as if after the weakness following a consuming fever he had grown strong again.

"I am grieved if there has arisen any misunderstanding between Miss Del Rose and Mr. Temple. I fear I am *de trop*. I beg you both will permit me to retire, while you amicably restore each other to favor."

Undine's bright eyes had watched every motion of his lips, while Temple was watching her. There was no love in his glances, and had Mrs. St. Havens seen him, she would have realized all she strove to explain to Undine.

"You are not intruding, sir. And since Mr. Temple chooses to utter language more elegant than truthful, permit me to remark, more forcibly than courteous, that your society is preferable to Mr. Temple's."

Her eyes flashed back their dark defiance at Clifford, who bowed as she concluded.

"Then I will at once retire. Perhaps we will see you at dinner, Haighte?"

He turned to Bertrand.

"I must also bid Miss Del Rose adieu, as I leave the city in an hour or so for The Towers."

A sudden dusky hue crept over her face, but she restrained the words that were forming on her lips:

"He dare not go without keeping his appointment," she thought; and secure in that thought, she bade the gentlemen adieu, with a frosty bow to Temple, and a warm, passionate glance at Bertrand. At the window she watched them down, her countenance, now that there were no watchful eyes upon her, displaying all the wild workings of a heart fired by an equally violent love and hate.

"How dare he do it! The cowardly villain,

to bring him here, and then to my face tell me of it! But you are thwarted, Clifford Temple! He whom I love I have blinded; he will be deaf to your stories—your truths, I may say when no one hears. Do your very worst, sir! I defy you! and not all the powers of earth or air shall deter me from being the bride of Bertrand Haighte!"

She clenched her fist after the retreating form of Temple.

"He'll come to-night, and when he asks me to be his bride I'll tell him yes—that the old family record need not be regarded in our case; that in marrying *me* the ban is removed! And then I will lead him to name an early day; and then that for Clifford Temple, Crystel Roscoe, or Mrs. St. Havens!"

She snapped her pretty fingers, and then went down to dinner.

CHAPTER IX.

GLORIOUS LIGHT.

THAT night, while Undine Del Rose sat waiting for her lover, he and his mother, with Lurline and Gussie, were gathered around their dining-table at The Towers, chatting over the incidents of the journey.

Lurline's face was resplendent with the joy that sat upon it, for Clifford Temple had requested permission to visit her in the succeeding week; and Bertrand had told her what Clifford had told him as they left Undine, that, although he had been engaged to Miss Del Rose, she had dissolved it by her actions, and he should formally return her her freedom at the earliest possible moment.

Bertrand seemed more joyous than he had been for several days; one reason was, the removal of the witchery that he was unable to escape; another, and better reason, was, he had decided, after mature deliberation, to follow Hellice Roscoe's advice, and lay before his mother the entire story.

If the tradition were true, the curse that ensued for acquainting the females of the Haightes with the family legend, then his mother would never live to see the sun rise again; instant vengeance would seize the recipient of the secret.

Bertrand was somewhat superstitious; he dearly loved his proud lady mother, and the struggle was a bitter one.

On the other side was Hellice's advice; the possibility of a greater joy—the restoration of Crystel, whom he loved with penitent affection, after his brief infatuation for Undine—than he dared imagine.

The sisters had gone for a short promenade on the dusky lawn; Mrs. Haighte was busy with some fine linen she was embroidering, and Bertrand, away back among the shadows, took this for his opportunity.

"Mother," he said, suddenly, "do you believe in the old traditional legends that have been handed down from father to son for several generations?"

"I must confess I am skeptical on that point. Some persons, I am aware, religiously cling to family superstitions; but it seems to me, in these enlightened days, they should be treated as they deserve, with contempt."

She little knew the ecstasy those words awoke

in his breast; he raised himself from the gay silken cushion, and strove to speak indifferently, while his heart was throbbing so madly.

"I heard, once, of one of these old legends, that was sacredly preserved by the sons of the family, and as religiously kept from the daughters and wives, on pain of sudden and immediate death."

Mrs. Haighte laughed; a mellow, natural melody that seemed to send a thrill of unutterable bliss through Bertrand's veins.

"Well, my boy, being as I am a liver in this wonderful nineteenth century, I would not feel the least uneasiness if I were a member of that romantic family, and by accident discovered it."

Bertrand sprung from his sofa in excited haste.

"Bless you, mother mine, for those words. Then will you listen while I tell you *my* story?"

In an instant she grew grave, and ceased her work.

"If you are in trouble, or in joy, my son, I am your mother, who would die to help you."

Bertrand pressed a loving kiss on her forehead.

"Then let me tell you."

He began at the beginning, telling her of Undine's visit to Edenwilde; of the cabalistic words that Crystel was to use as a test; how he had recognized them as being the same as recorded in the mysterious letter; how Crystel and he had been sundered thereby; how Undine had possession of the old family ring, and so on, until she was in full possession of all the facts.

"Now, mother, you are doomed, if the tradition be true."

Mrs. Haighte laughed assuringly.

"I think I will pour your coffee as usual, to-morrow morning, my dear son. I am somewhat surprised, I must admit, that this story is so new to me. Surely I would have heard of it before."

"No," he said, eagerly. "But then you remember that it has been guarded as a most profound secret."

She looked seriously at Bertrand.

"You really place confidence in this affair of the solemnly-mysterious letter and its charge?"

Bertrand could not help blushing under that earnest, questioning, half-sarcastic gaze.

"I am fain to admit that I do. Else why permit this painful state of affairs between Crystel and I?"

"True. I am sorry for what you have suffered, and my poor Crystel, who believes you an oracle. I am pleased that the noble-minded Hellice takes so sensible a view of it, while I am free to confess, Bertrand, that I am a little mortified that you, a Haighte, are so easily impressed by a trumped-up story of a girl with pretty eyes."

Bertrand could not say a word in his defense; then, after a brief silence, he seemed suddenly to have solved a puzzling point.

"But the letter, mother, subscribed by all the Haightes since Lord Oscar? and the yellow, faded paper? and the very words that Undine spoke?"

"Perhaps I can assist in solving all that.

Bertrand, you never knew your father was insane the last six months of his life. We kept it from every one but the attending physician, who can testify to the truth of my assertion. It is more than likely that he, who was, like yourself, of a superstitious, romantic turn, has prepared that manuscript, with all the cunning of insanity, in moments when he was sufficiently sane to remember his prevailing characteristics. As to the paper, there still remain quires, that Lord Oscar brought from over the water: it is in the secretary in your father's study, where he spent most of his time. The signatures may, or may not, be good *fac-similes*; how should you know? The jewel that has been seen on this adventuress girl's hand is the only deplorable thing in the whole affair. I am sorry it is not in our possession. Depend upon it, it has been stolen, and by this girl, who, I plainly see, wants you to marry her. Further, perhaps you will find that the manuscript has also disappeared, together with the ring, and the same person has taken both. The executor may have mentioned the affair to some one, by which it reached her ears. She obtained the letter; after that, what is easier than to work upon a mind inclined to regard every thing as mysterious. Once more, Bertrand, why, if you were never to marry on account of this 'Florian,' has this girl taken such pains to win you?"

Mrs. Haighte paused after this long speech; and Bertrand seized her hand in a rapture of delight.

"My mother, you are simply perfect! No lawyer could have elucidated a case so clearly, satisfactorily and naturally as you have this. You have convinced me, mother; you have shamed me with your noble, sensible view of this affair, and I will bless you to the day of my death; I and my darling Crystel!"

"I have only shown you what you could not see alone. There needs but one proof; if I could see the letter I would at once recognize your father's writing. However, you need not wait until we find it before you seek Crystel and tell her the story as you have told me. If I survive the curse," she smiled as she said it, "and you see me at breakfast, you can ride to Edenwilde and arrange every thing anew. Now, my foolish boy, kiss me good-night, and let me go to decide either your misery or happiness."

Bertrand kissed her reverently; then he went to the corner window of the library to watch the light in Crystel's window.

CHAPTER X.

PREPARATIONS.

CRYSTEL ROSCOE, in her white cashmere morning wrapper, with its facings of orange satin, and buttons of inlaid gold and pearl, was sitting in her dressing-room that dull, cloudy November day, while Hellice, cheery and brave amid the storm of grief that had burst upon her timid sister, was arranging fairy white bows and rosettes of gossamer ribbons.

"See, what can be prettier for the flowers? So fleecy and feathery."

Crystel turned her eyes away from the basket of materials.

"It seems such a mockery, Hellice. It hurts me more than if Bertrand were dead to see you persistently going on preparing for a bridal that never can be."

Hot tears came stealing through the closed lashes, and her lips were quivering.

"That's all nonsense! Truly, Crystel, do you think for a moment I would cause you pain? Would I, a woman of my years, prepare for a wedding I felt never would occur? No, my sister, you know me better. I make these bridal favors because I *know* they will be needed on the twentieth of November, just as we expected they would be."

She cast a bright encouraging glance at Crystel; but her head was turned from the glittering array.

"Do you know *why* I am so confident, Crystel, dear? Because, when I am once convinced that Bertrand will not seek counsel from his mother, I shall tell her myself all I know, and thus secure aid in unraveling this affair."

"And maybe— Oh, Hellice, am I dreaming? See, is that not him coming up the avenue? Tell me, or am I going crazy?"

Crystel's languor had turned to wild excitement. She sprung to the window, and stood gazing at Bertrand, as he galloped up to the house, waving his handkerchief, his handsome face all alight with the good news he brought.

"Of course it's Bertrand, and, my word for it, he comes to clear up all this mystery. Crystel, my darling, don't cry so!"

Yet she was thankful she did weep, and Bertrand sprung through the French window in a tumult of pleasurable excitement.

"Crystel! Crystel! it's all right! thank God! I've only been the victim of a joke that has all been explained."

Then, when he could calm himself down, he related the story to them, while Hellice worked away at the bridal favors, and Crystel sat watching her lover, her sweet face momentarily losing its pitiful sadness, and rapidly growing piquant and fair as before this sudden, short trouble.

"So I had better finish the bridal favors, Crystel! And here, Bertrand, I am going to pin one to your coat, to be your talisman against future danger."

And then, when, with exquisite delicacy, Hellice made an errand for more white ribbon, Bertrand took Crystel's head on his breast, and with her eyes reading his face, confessed what he had not told before Hellice; all his mad, wicked infatuation for the dark-eyed girl, whose consummate arts and bold adventure, they fully believed had wrought all the mischief.

And when he besought her pardon, she kissed him, and trusted him as ever.

So the cloud, that seemed so dense it never could blow over, had disappeared as suddenly as it came; and joy reigned supreme at Edenwilde and The Towers.

All that bright, cool Friday evening, Undine Del Rose sat in Mrs. St. Havens's elegant parlors, waiting and wondering; now sure Bertrand Haighte would be there the next moment; now troubled and doubting, lest Clifford Temple had succeeded in turning him away from her.

She had looked forward to this evening all through the day, as the time that was so triumphantly to crown all her endeavors, and now, when the flagon was so near her thirsty lips, that Clifford Temple, of all men, the man she had been taught had a strange, secret power over her—the man she had loved before she saw Bertrand, and whom she would again turn to, if by any dire fate she missed her chance of the heir of The Towers, to be suddenly and violently robbed of her lover, as she believed Bertrand to be, was almost maddening.

She was sitting beside the register, when footsteps echoing on the marble-floored hall, caused her to listen, with a delicious flush at the thought that he had come at last.

The door was thrown open by the footman; but it was not Bertrand, it was Clifford Temple.

Undine arose haughtily.

"I beg to be excused, sir, I am expecting company."

Clifford walked up to the marble mantle and leaned against it, watching the anger tide of color that ebbed and flowed under her clear skin.

"I know you are waiting for Mr. Haighte; but, as he returned to The Towers by the eight o'clock train, he desired me to excuse him. Undine, how dare you undertake this game?"

He suddenly spoke with a commanding tone.

"How dare you question me thus? If Mr. Haighte has gone away, it is because you have been poisoning him."

"Well, perhaps it was my fault; perhaps your own, in carrying your little game too far. Undine, you knew you were engaged to me when you denied it to-day. Why did you tell Mr. Haighte I was paying my addresses to Mrs. St. Havens, when you knew it was false?"

"Because I hated you so; and—yes, I'm not ashamed to say it—cared so much for him. There, Clifford Temple, are you satisfied?"

She sat, twisting her rings around and around, angry, mortified and wounded.

"I do not seek any satisfaction. I did not call for the purpose of angering you, but merely to warn you against prosecuting your plans further. Because, Undine, Bertrand Haighte has gone home to marry his sweetheart at Edenwilde."

Undine sprung from her chair like a tigress.

"That's false. He never shall marry her, so help me Heaven! You think to taunt me into a reconciliation with yourself!"

"Not at all. I hereby release you from your engagement to me; and with my withdrawal, you may be pleased to learn that I shall transfer my addresses to Miss Lurline Haighte."

A sudden pallor crept to the corners of her lips. Both gone!—no! she would rally yet!

She bowed sarcastically.

"Thank you most warmly. Present my compliments to the lady, also my condolences."

Clifford laughed.

"I never saw the jealous phase of your character before, Undine."

Her cheeks flamed instantly.

"Then you see it now; not of you, sir, but of one worthy of it. When you see me the bride of Bertrand Haighte you will agree with me."

Clifford walked up to her gravely, not unkindly.

"Undine, I will again warn you not to continue this wild, wicked chase for a man you never can marry. Yes, Undine, were he heart-free to-day, and begged you to be his bride, I would see you laid in your coffin before you should marry him. Better that you died this hour than cherish a love for him longer. Undine, we have been lovers; I hope we are friends; therefore, take warning by my words—by Mrs. St. Havens's words; and believe me, that, sooner than see you standing beside him at the altar, I would take your life, and go down to my own grave with the stain of your heart's blood on my hands. That would be a mission of mercy to you and him."

Despite her raging anger, Undine listened, and wondered what he meant.

When she had gone to Crystel Roscoe, and told her almost the same story, she had not pitied the bewildered girl; now, when Clifford Temple was warning *her*, she began to understand dimly how Crystel had felt; and yet a wounded anger was uppermost in her heart, and a burning thirst for the accomplishment of her aims, be their result what it might be.

She said not a word when he had finished, but answered him by a cold bow, and an ominous gleaming of her black eyes.

After he had gone, she saw the wedding cards he had accidentally forgotten.

Her whole figure shook as if swept by a tornado, as she held the pure white symbols of happiness in her hand, and her eyes seemed like a concentrated blaze of hidden fire as she read that the marriage between her only idol and Crystel Roscoe would occur on the twentieth of November, at Edenwilde, at (?) o'clock, P. M.

"And *this* is the end! *this* the sight I see, when I should have heard his lips call me his!"

She tore the cards into fragments with a savage satisfaction; then stamped on them, in the uncontrollable fit of passion that had smitten her with its fiery hand.

Far into the morning hours she sat there; and then, as the little cuckoo clock chimed three, she arose from her low chair and sought her room.

"To-day is the last of October; I have a little time left me yet. We shall see how this ends, after all!"

In her room, just as the first faint sounds of life were breaking, she was handed a telegraph dispatch; and a fierce, ominous, yet withal triumphant delight shone in her eyes as she read:

"Annette Willoughby is wanted—sickness."

It was addressed to her own name.

CHAPTER XI.

PREPARING FOR THE BLOW.

HALF-WAY between The Towers and Edenwilde, on the same side of the river as the Roscoe estate, and standing a considerable distance from the main road, was the cosy, humble cottage of the Halls; the family of whom a trivial mention has been made in the preceding chap-

ter; the place Undine Del Rose had visited the day of her call upon Crystel Roscoe and Bertrand Haighte.

It was rather a pretty place, with tall trees hiding it from view, and a faint glimmer of the river visible from its upper windows; a pleasant home for the small family who lived there.

They were but three in number. The husband, Jacob Hall, who was gardener at Edenwilde; his wife, whom the housekeeper at Edenwilde sometimes employed on extra occasions; and Lida, their niece, the child of Mr. Hall's brother, a young woman of twenty, who was Crystel's dressing-maid; who had been in that capacity a long time. She was not a good-looking girl, and had it not been for the faithfulness with which she attended to her duties, she never would have remained at Edenwilde so long as she had.

Her recommendations, coming as they had, together with her aunt's and uncle's, from a friend of Mrs. Haighte's, had been greatly in her favor; and so, in spite of her homely face, with its keen, sullen black eyes, and the heavy, overshadowing hair, that made her so ugly, she stayed on, year after year, and her mistress became accustomed to her looks completely.

It was Lida Hall that Undine Del Rose had mentioned to Mrs. St. Havens; Lida, who had years before worked for Mrs. Temple, who had recommended the family to Mrs. Haighte.

In those early days, when Undine visited often at the Temples', when she and Lida and Clifford had not yet been fettered by the courtesies of a fashion that in later years forbade a son and daughter of wealth and aristocracy associating with a maid of no name, particularly, had played together in Mrs. Judge Temple's carriage-house, and built houses of kindling-wood, glad to escape the fine dresses and costly toys awaiting them in the parlor.

Between Undine and Lida had always existed a friendship, although Clifford had completely forgotten her; and, despite the difference in their position, Undine had several times gone to see her, with no particular reason therefor until the last two times; and then, in the plottings she had instituted, her far-seeing eyes had discerned the fact that of all allies, of all confidantes, there was none on the earth so adapted, both by nature—for she had, with her astute perceptions, long ago read Lida Hall's disposition, which, being not unlike her own in some points, may explain their cold, calm friendship—and acquaintance as Lida Hall.

The position she occupied in the Roscoe household was simply splendid toward the furtherance of her plans; her frequent errands to The Towers was another satisfactory condition.

It had been in September, on one of Undine's visits—calls rather—at the Hall cottage, that she had seen Bertrand Haighte, in all his attractiveness and elegance, as he and Crystel had ridden along the road.

To one of her disposition, it was enough merely to see him; and despite her existing engagement with Mr. Temple, she made up her mind on the moment that she admired him greatly. Then she thought of him, waking and sleeping, until at last she resolved to win him.

It seemed, perhaps, a most absurd and impos-

sible idea; and to persons of ordinary conceptions, it doubtless would have been. But Undine Del Rose was a woman of no common intellect; one, had it been trained in a noble, high-principled channel, would have made her a rare, glorious specimen of womanhood. Therefore, the more impassable the barriers, the more determined she became to surmount them; until, her whole soul fired with love for Bertrand Haighte, and a consequent natural hatred for Crystel Roscoe, she schemed and planned and arranged her mode of procedure.

Several weeks previous to the day when she had gone to Edenwilde, she had, on a day's visit at the Riverside Lodge—so Lida had named the unpretentious little four-room cottage—been invited by Lida to go over to The Towers with her, on an errand for Miss Hellice to Mrs. Haighte's housekeeper, for a recipe or something.

She had greedily accepted the invitation, knowing that, as Bertrand was over at Edenwilde, she could, perhaps, prevail on the housekeeper to show her through the house; something might accidentally transpire to assist her plans.

Her dress was as simple, apparently, as Lida's own; and in the plain brown silk traveling dress, with a large water-proof of Mrs. Hall's around her, and her hair, for a rarity, fastened in a coil, and a brown veil doubled over her face and hands, she truly concluded that if, by accident, she met Bertrand or any one else, they never would recognize her in after times when she might come boldly to The Towers in her new *personnel*.

Certainly Undine Del Rose was audaciously presumptive; but it was both her presumption and audacity that should help to carry her through this campaign against Crystel Roscoe's happiness.

Lida introduced her with all formality to the portly housekeeper, Mrs. Bowen; but her ears had misled her.

"Yes, I am pleased to meet your friend, Miss Rose. Won't you walk up to the dining-room, Lida? My receipts are all there."

Undine's heart swelled with joy at the accidental misunderstanding.

"It's Fate in my favor already," she had whispered to herself.

"If you could spare the time, Mrs. Bowen, I would like to show this lady through the rooms."

"And that's just what I can't do, at all. I'm sorry, but there's all the maids gone to some fandango or other down to York, and I'm awful busy foldin' up this linen."

"Perhaps you will trust me to show her through? You know me, Mrs. Bowen; I'll be particular."

The housekeeper deliberated a minute before she replied.

"Well, I don't know as I care. Of course if Miss Crystel trusts you among all her finery, I can where there's nothing but heavy furniture. Be careful now, Lidy, to lock all the doors agen."

A fiery red had come in spots to Undine's cheeks at the half-suspicion, but she could afford to conceal it.

Together they went through the elegant, spacious apartments, while Undine noted every object they passed.

At last, having entered the corridor, out of which the doors of the family sleeping-rooms opened, Lida started to return to the dining-room, but Undine detained her.

"You haven't taken me in these yet."

She was pointing at Bertrand's room door.

"But those are strictly private; Mrs. Bowen might not like it. It is Mr. Bertrand's."

"But let us go in—*please*, Lida."

"No, indeed, I can not—"

"I tell you I am going in; give me the keys."

She was very calm, but Lida knew, of old, that red light in her eyes, as she took the keys from her hand.

"I want you to come in. I want you particularly."

And Lida followed her into Bertrand Haighte's sleeping apartment.

Undine gazed around, her eyes growing tender as they rested on the lace-ruffled pillow where his head had rested; and with a soft, fleet step she stole up to the low rosewood bedstead, and pressed a kiss on the unconscious linen.

"Undine!"

Lida called her name, half-angered, half-amused.

"Yes, it is because I love him so. Now, Lida Hall, I want you to swear to me to keep a secret for me. Will you do it?"

And then, standing in the very room where Bertrand had dreamed of Crystel so many times, Undine told Lida Hall her love; her hopes; her resolves; her plans.

"And now, Lida Hall, I want you to aid me in my work. I will direct you in all things; you need have no mind of your own. Only be guided by me, and success will crown us both. Obey, and the day you call me Mrs. Haighte, I will give you a check for a thousand dollars; *refuse*, Lida Hall, and my lips shall disclose the secret of your life that I hold! You know of the child found choked to death; so do I. You know its mother, also its murderess? *So do I*. Now, Lida, which shall it be?"

The girl's face had changed to a dull, ashy pallor, as she looked up in Undine's pitiless, passionate eyes. Then she arose from the footstool and went up to Undine.

"There can be no alternative. But I ask, is there blood to be shed? If so, you may kill me at your feet first."

"You committed murder once; are you soft-hearted now? But for your comfort—no, I do not think of any such desperate measures. Listen, let me tell you."

So she told her, in full detail, what must be done, in a low, eager voice, that sent creeping shivers down the listener's back.

"You seem surprised that I have obtained this knowledge; but I tell you, Lida, I believe Satan himself has aided me. Some day I will tell you where I learned what to do; the next thing is to obtain possession of these papers."

Lida went slowly after Undine down the stairs; on the landing she turned.

"You go first, and don't forget what you are to do."

Then they went home, and in the gathering dusk, where no one ever met her, Undine went back to the city.

One month later she had returned; and Lida Hall met her with a parcel.

"I did not do as you directed, but have accomplished what you bade me do."

"Not as I said?"

"Fate planned it better. Mrs. Bowen has been sick of diphtheria, and is just recovering—is still only convalescing. There was no one to nurse her, the girls being away on their vacation; my aunt is also on a visit, and Miss Crystel offered my services. I had the house to myself—what better chance could have been offered?"

Undine stood, with wide eyes listening, a triumphant smile irradiating her face, as she clutched the papers.

"I was so afraid Lawyer Allan was wrong; I have promised him five hundred dollars for his disclosure of the stronghold of this document. How little the Haightes dream of the perfidy of their talented, fashionable executor!"

Lina leaned her head wearily on her hands, while Undine was greedily running over the faded papers, and still holding a ring between her fingers.

"It is strange you found this, too. I heard lawyer Allan say it had not been seen for years."

"It is because I searched the old secretary so thoroughly, I suppose. I must go lie down, Undine, I feel so wretched."

And her flushed face denoted her feelings.

"Perhaps you are getting the diphthe—good Heavens, Lida, what if my all-powerful star is in the ascendancy? You take this disease from Mrs. Bowen, I take your place as Crystel Roscoe's maid! Lida, I hope, I pray you may have the diphtheria!"

A little horrified cry broke from Lida's lips.

"Not that it will make any difference at all to my plans, for you know I intended becoming a member of the Roscoe family by some means or other; only this is all so natural, so unexpected. Remember, I shall return by to-morrow night in answer to a telegram from you to Annette Willoughby—you will remember that name, because your baby was to be named that in case it had lived. Whatever my disguise, betray no surprise; and satisfy the Halls that I am a sister of Joe Willoughby, your lover. You understand, Lida? Remember to propose me immediately to Miss Roscoe. And now, hoping to find you ill when I return in answer to a telegram, I will go directly home, to prepare my costume for this delightful *bal masque*."

With a low, heart-sick sigh, Lida Hall watched her away, as she hastened down the lonely roadside to the station.

There Undine hired a horse; and, arranging her slightly-dishveled toilet by the little cracked looking-glass in the ladies' saloon, she started forth to Edenwilde, on her mission of sin; from thence to The Towers, and then home, well satisfied as to her success.

But at home the days wore on, and there came no telegram from Lida Hall; she wondered what it meant; she knew she dared not play her false.

And then, when Bertrand Haighte had visited her, she had felt so glad she was home to receive him; after, when Clifford Temple had divulged her falsity to him, she determined to go to Lida and learn why she had been silent.

Then had come the summons; and, after writing a note to Mrs. St. Havens, stating that she had received an urgent message from a sick schoolmate in Boston, and did not know but that she might remain several weeks, she started on her career.

CHAPTER XII.

WHAT WAS DONE.

It was true; Lida Hall was ill of diphtheria—dangerously ill; and because of the nearness of her wedding, Crystel Roscoe had availed herself of Lida's offer to send for Annette Willoughby.

Mrs. Hall had herself carried the message to the office, and afterward kept her own counsel, at Lida's suggestion, who told her that if Miss Crystel knew that Annette was in any way acquainted with Miss Del Rose, she might not employ her after the affairs so well known to the family had transpired.

Then the knowledge of Undine's visits had been kept quite still, at Undine's own request, long before this existing state of affairs; because her pride revolted from the idea of it being known that she visited a common servant. Therefore no suspicion existed at all; and even Mrs. Hall had not the first distant idea but that Annette Willoughby was merely recommended by Miss Del Rose. The affair of her niece with Joe Willoughby was a sealed page to her, having occurred while Lida was a year away at Lowell, in the factories, while Undine had been at a Massachusetts school, and to whom Lida had applied for money and aid.

Thus Undine's tracks were covered completely; and she presented herself, not an ill-looking woman, with her light, flossy hair combed low on her forehead, and over it a lace cap, jaunty and rather pretty. She had pasted a long, narrow strip of black court-plaster across her cheek, between the lips and chin; her complexion was very dark, and a little sallow.

A pair of blue glasses she asked permission to wear, saying she had been employed on fine embroidery so long that she could not bear the light yet, but hoped to leave them off in a few weeks.

Tender-hearted Crystel told her it made not the slightest difference; hired her on Lida's recommendation, and went on preparing for the wedding-day.

Sunny-skied, frosty and quiet it dawned, and as Crystel drew aside the lace curtains and looked abroad upon beautiful Edenwilde, she wondered if ever bride went forth from a fairer spot.

Afar off, with the merrily-flowing Hudson between, were the rugged brown walls of the stately Towers, surrounded by the tall trees, and lying against the sloping Highlands that stretched up to the intense blue sky as if seek-

ing to penetrate the happiness stored up for the bride.

That was a blissful hour Crystel spent in sweet communion with her maiden heart, alone with nature, on the morning of her wedding-day. There did not seem the tiniest cloud on her horizon; and even when she thought of the fascinating stranger and her ominous warning, she calmly smiled, then whispered her psalm of praise that she had passed through the trial, bitter though it was; for she loved Bertrand better than ever.

All the morning was the delightful bustle of preparation; Hellice moved hither and thither, guiding and directing all the affairs, while Crystel, alone of them all, the most deeply concerned, sat wrapt in a delicious, idle, dreamy reverie.

With the noon train the guests began to arrive, and the spacious mansion was a scene of merry pleasantry.

Later, after an informal lunch, came an early dinner; then the grand preparations for the ceremony that was to occur at the hour of eight, to be immediately followed by the departure of the married couple for the city, where they took an early morning steamer for Boston.

It was a few minutes past six when, complete in her wedding attire, Crystel lovingly dismissed her sister and Bertrand, who had been eagerly watching the process of part of the toilet, and assisting the blushing girl as her veil and wreath were being adjusted.

Now Crystel had begged them to leave her, and with a kiss and a whisper, Bertrand went away with Hellice.

All that hour the guests were gathering in the saloon; a delightfully joyous noise filled the mansion, yet still the door of Crystel's room remained locked. At exactly eight, General Roscoe tapped, while directly after him, in regular order, stood the bridesmaids; at the foot of the stairs Bertrand, with his groomsmen, awaited the party.

A second elapsed, and then the door was opened, and she came out, her veil drooping lowly over her elegant sunny-gold hair, her eyes cast down, even though her veil covered her face. She was pale as marble, but that was owing to excitement partly. She carried her filmy lace handkerchief in one white-gloved hand; and a tiny bouquet in the other. General Roscoe gave her his arm with all the gallantry of a man of thirty.

"We are waiting for you, my dear. The bishop came a quarter of an hour ago. One kiss, my little Crystel Roscoe, for the last time."

He lightly touched her forehead, without raising the cloud of lace, and then they went down.

At the foot of the staircase Bertrand took her from General Roscoe, and they promenaded slowly through the long, dim parlors that looked like fairy-land in its fragrant, dusky gloom—Crystel had wanted it so, fearing lest she should be nervous with a half-hundred pairs of eyes watching her in a full glare of light. She gently pressed his arm, and he bent on her a glance of tenderest affection as they took their places on the floor—to be married; and in after days Bertrand shivered with horror as he remembered it.

The ceremony began; it ended, and Bertrand turned to kiss his bride.

"My wife, my darling wife!"

She trembled just a second, then threw up her veil, and, stepping forward, looked defiantly around.

Bertrand almost screamed.

"Good God, what does this mean? *Undine Del Rose!*"

A sudden rush forward of the guests; a murmur among them, as of an angry surge. Hellice sprung forward with a deathly pale face.

"Where's my sister, woman? how dare you, how dare you!"

She dashed through the guests, her long silken dress trailing after her, to her sister's room; while Bertrand and General Roscoe stood like men turned to statues.

Then the bridegroom aroused from the stupor he had been momentarily suffering, and advanced to Undine, who, calm, pale and collected, stood her well-won ground.

"Woman! fiend! you shall answer for this! General, let us go to Crystel, the poor darling—hold, where is she?"

"In her room," she returned, calmly.

The men started to the door, whither half of the guests had rushed to learn of Crystel, when suddenly General Roscoe turned about.

"Don't let her go—ah, by Heavens, she has disappeared!"

It was even so; and on the carpet lay the veil and long shiny locks of golden hair. For a second, a silence, amounting to fearful intense-ness, reigned; then General Roscoe sprung to an open French window.

"She has gone through this, the demoness!"

It seemed true, for a fragment of white satin was clinging to a jagged point in the iron balcony.

CHAPTER XIII.

AFTER THE BRIDAL.

HELLICE, closely followed by Bertrand and General Roscoe, had hurried up the stairs to the door of Crystel's room; it was unlocked, and they rushed in, fearing, wondering what they should see.

And then, when Hellice had reached midway the room, a loud scream burst from her lips, as rigid as marble, with the blood curdling round her heart, she met her sister, coming up through the dim distance of the long suit, so pale, so pitiful!

"I am so bewildered, sister! where have I been? where is Bertrand?"

She passed her hand over her forehead in a gesture of painful self-inquiry.

And just at that juncture the startled members of the household, headed by General Roscoe and Bertrand, followed by a number of the guests, entered the room to discover the cause of the shrieks that had awakened them.

General Roscoe suddenly paused in his hasty entrance, as his eyes fell on his youngest daughter's figure; and a silence of fear and awe fell on them all; a silence that Crystel was the first to break.

"Oh, father, won't you tell me what it means? I surely have not been ill, have I? or how else came my hair short?"

And then General Roscoe caught her in his arms, and the spell seemed lifted off them all.

"My child, what does it mean? Where did you leave Bertrand—how came this splendid hair shorn so closely?"

"Oh, Bertrand! where has he gone? why doesn't he come and see if I am ready for the wedding? It seems as if I was all dressed once, and waiting for you to tap on the door. I know I felt very faint all at once—I suppose it has only been a dream."

"A dream!" thundered the General, "it is an infernal game! Crystel, my child, you have not been married to Bertrand Haighte! The ceremony was performed, but between him and another—oh, God! we can't see through this Crystel, my daughter, Bertrand has married some one else! but it shall all be made right."

She stood like a statue of marble.

"Some—one—else?"

Slowly the words dropped from her lips.

Then Hellice, with her quick returning foresight, stood up and spoke quietly and convincingly.

"It has been a plot; I think I comprehend at least a portion of it. Bertrand, will you attend Crystel to another room? and see that John goes immediately after Dr. Bellanger? I will write to have the woman arrested."

But Bertrand could speak no words of cheering assurance to his love; for, when Hellice turned toward him, they all saw that he had fainted just as he had ascended the stairs.

Several hours later, when Bertrand had aroused from the deadly swoon, he explained, as best he could, the probable reason for the strange affair. Afterward, so soon as the excitement subsided, the guests retired to their rooms, while Clifford Temple, pale and speechless from the supreme horror of the occasion, paced up and down the front piazza till the gray dawn.

Up-stairs, in Crystel's room, Annette Willoughby was sitting in the gloom, watching her mistress as she slept, and listening to the measured tread below that she knew so well. The next morning she wrote a short note, and this was its contents:

"MR. SAMUEL GREENLEAF:

"Please direct and drop the inclosed letter in the box, and oblige,
A. W."

The "inclosed" was a letter directed in cipher.

"For your sweetheart, eh, Annie?" the letter man had said, when she gave it to him; and she laughed and simpered.

But several hours later Lawyer Allan inquired at Station C if there was a letter there for his coachman, Samuel Greenleaf; and then, an hour later still, he mailed the "inclosed" at another station; and when he had translated it, in accordance with the cipher he had been instructed with, by Undine Del Rose, it read:

"Bertrand Haighte, The Towers."

And Lawyer Allan rubbed his hands, and thought not only of the fat fees Miss Del Rose paid, not of his own consummate perfidy and treachery to the Haightes, but that the splendid Undine had promised to consider him, in a matrimonial view.

At midday, Bertrand received his letter, and this was what it said:

"If you want to be righted, come to the 'Oriental Hotel to-day, at four P. M. UNDINE."

That afternoon, Annette had gone into her mistress's room just after midday.

"Could you spare me till dinner to-day, Miss Crystel? I have an errand in Brooklyn that's very particular."

She went down to New York on the three o'clock train; purchased a walking suit complete at Mme. Oliphant's establishment, and then, still in her disguise, went to the hotel.

Once in the room she had asked for, she carefully removed all traces of Annette Willoughby, then called the waiter and bade him show Mr. Haighte—whom the man knew well—to her. Then she sat down and waited.

CHAPTER XIV.

A STORMY INTERVIEW.

SHE had not long to wait; for, on the stroke of the hour, Bertrand Haighte opened the door; pale, frigid, angered.

"I am here, Undine Del Rose."

He never bowed, or otherwise acknowledged her presence.

"No. I am Undine Del Rose no longer. I have the honor of being Mrs. Haighte, of The Towers. Oh, Bertrand! Bertrand!" and her tones lost their slight touch of sarcastic triumph, and sunk to a low, entreating murmur, "don't quite hate me! I have but one excuse, and that is my love for you. Nothing else would have warranted the awful risk I have run. And see, Bertrand, Providence has signally favored me, for not even *you* read my identity."

She laid her hand on his shoulder, and looked up in his face, as white as death, with eyes that would have annihilated her, had that been possible.

He dashed her off with a gesture of ineffable scorn and disgust.

"Don't touch me! don't mention the holy name of the Almighty with those false, lying lips! Say rather that Satan and all his angels have aided you in this fiendish scheme! Woman—tell me how you dared do it; tell me, before I crush all your life out of you!"

He advanced a step toward her, his hot breath flaming on her cheeks.

"Bertrand, be reasonable. Remember, I am your bride, married to you by every law that the land demands. Listen, Bertrand, while I humble myself to you, and beg and pray you to love me a—"

"Silence! not a word of such blasphemy from your lips! I command you, tell me what you mean—the woman I hate and abhor! the woman who shall never be my wife, despite all your infernal machinations."

Undine smiled defiantly.

"And suppose I refuse to listen to your demand?"

"Then I will wrench it from you! What did you do to my betrothed?"

"A strange question for a husband to ask his wife!"

"You madden me! I your husband? Never.

if you were the last woman on God's earth. You, the arch fiendess, *my* wife? who has crushed my happiness the second time? Not if I could thereby earn your eternal salvation!"

"I am sorry you persist in this style of language. Bertrand, doesn't it move you in the least when you know what I have dared to do for your sake?"

He paced to and fro while she was speaking; then he stopped before her.

"Does it move me? Yes, with infinite pity and tenderness when I think of my crushed Crystel; moved to scorn and disgust when I look at you, with all the beauty you have used to cover your wickedness."

"You thought and spoke differently the evening you spent in Lexington avenue; the morning we rode in the Central Park."

A blush of angry shame flooded his face.

"If I was infatuated then, I am disenchanted now! I thank God you have no legal claim on me now!"

She laughed lightly.

"I think I have. Are we not lawfully married?"

"Married?" He fairly thundered the word. "Never will I admit it! Before the whole world I will proclaim your treachery!"

She extended her hand, on which glittered the curious green-and-scarlet-veined jewel.

"You do not regard this? You are no longer afraid of it?"

He grasped her slender wrist, and tore the ring from her finger.

"Should I fear an impostor, a thief, as I believe you to be? or a ring that is my own, and that never wrought me any harm?"

A sudden, intense light shot from her eyes, and she compressed her lips a moment before she answered.

"It may never yet have wrought harm, but I swear that it shall. Now, Bertrand Haighte, what are we to do?"

He curled his lips contemptuously.

"I neither care to know, or feel at all interested in your future movements. I shall take the first train to Edenwilde, and further expose this treachery. And if harm comes to Crystel Roscoe, *woe* to you!"

He never vouchsafed her a glance as he went out, and as the door closed after him, his parting words echoed on her ear:

"*Woe to you!*"

Was it a curse or a prophecy? And so far, her deeply-plotted plans, her superhuman effort that had been so tantalizingly crowned with success, had come to this!

She walked up and down and around that elegant room; while, like a keen poniard at her heart, was the bitter, unendurable anguish of the knowledge that he did not love her—never would love her.

She sunk down, exhausted, on one of the sofas, cursing the luckless fate that had lured her on to fondly hope and believe he would forget Crystel Roscoe, his first love, the moment he saw her.

"I have been worse than mad! I have been too hasty; I have thwarted what long-suffering patience might have accomplished. And now, now he despises me; while I—oh, I shall die for the want of his love!"

A look of unutterable despair came over her face.

"And while I've been engaged, heart and soul, in seeking to win this man; while I crazed my brains in scheming, planning and contriving, I've lost the other, who, before I saw Bertrand Haighte, I loved as I thought I never could love again. Clifford Temple has passed beyond my reach; these accursed Haightes have won him, too! And I, I am alone, unloved, despised! I can not bear it; I will die! My brain is scorching, and my heart—my poor, trampled heart—that is broken and bleeding!"

And all that long, dreary night she sat there; and the fire burned itself away to a handful of ghostly ashes; the light was turned down by some one below as the day came on.

In the cold, gray dawn of that winter's morning, shivering and numb, she still sat on; the stages began to go rattling by; the hum and bustle of a waking city grew gradually louder, and yet Undine never moved from her position.

After an hour or so, the chambermaid tapped for admission; that aroused her, and she called to her to come in an hour.

She was fearfully changed, and a faint cry of horror issued from her blue lips as she looked at herself in the mirror.

"Curses fall on him forever, who has wrought this!"

Her eyes had seemed to freeze; from a warm, liquidly passionate light in their dark depths they had turned to a hard, steely blackness, with neither soul or expression in them; around her mouth were deep tense lines, that forty years of life would hardly have drawn there.

But worse than all, and so horrible it was, that she gazed at it in a bewildered, frightened stare, was her long, thick hair, that, when she entered that room was black as a raven's wing, and now hung in yellow-white luxuriousness over her shoulders.

She felt herself wrecked; wrecked in appearance, as well as in heart, and, with the sight of her ruin, fled the last vestige of life in the passionate love for Bertrand Haighte, which she had been all the night through killing.

With clenched fists, she gazed back into her dull, deadened eyes.

"For this I'll make him rue the day! I swore once to be his bride; I *am* his bride, and now I swear unsleeping vengeance against my husband! And before I see him in the arms of another—that fool he dared prefer above me—I'll lay him in his coffin, with myself, dead, across it!"

She deliberately arose and arranged her false, flossy hair; her storm of passion was spent, and her hands were untrembling as she wound coil after coil around her shapely head; she adjusted the blue glasses, and then removed the black alpaca walking-suit.

This she did up in a bundle, and donned the garments she had worn from Edenwilde; and the bride of a day went forth, husbandless, despised, alone; possessed of a fearful strength, that would not hesitate to strike any blow that would remove from her path the obstacle that hindered her one object of the now lonely existence.

That object was—REVENGE!

CHAPTER XV.

DID SHE LOSE IT?

If the family at Edenwilde were all up in arms about the strange events of the preceding night, the household at The Towers were in a similar state, particularly their guest, Clifford Temple.

At first he could not seem to comprehend it, so suddenly and mysteriously had it all happened; then, when the truth gradually made itself clear, he started at once for the city.

"You know not this girl as well as I; nor her disposition. She will not give you up, so long as she has the faintest claim upon you," he said to Bertrand, as he stopped for a moment at Edenwilde, where he found Crystel and young Haighte in the parlor.

Bertrand was pacing the floor like a chained tiger, who cannot brook another instant's confinement.

"But, man, has she no delicacy thus to thrust herself upon me? Where is her womanhood that it does not cry out upon her?"

Temple's answer was a gloomy laugh.

"Natures like hers know no reason when their will determines to attain to any object. I have known the girl since she was a child, and I can say, with truth, she is the most passionate-tempered person I ever saw."

"But a divorce can be obtained; it is merely a question of time."

"Yes, but you may depend upon it, that she will never leave you to yourself."

Crystel's eyes grew bright with the anger in their depths.

"Undine Del Rose dare not cross his path again. Let her but attempt it, and I will find a way to remove her."

Bertrand smiled upon her.

"With so loving and brave a champion and protectress, what should I dread, Temple?"

"I hope my words will prove an idle song. I fear— But let us not court such uncomfortable thoughts. There comes your maid with your shawl; the room seems chilly."

It was Annette, but no one noticed her.

"I shall have to bid you good-morning, Miss Crystel; and if I carry Bertrand to the city, you will believe it is for his own and your good?"

But, after they were gone, Crystel grew strangely at unrest, and walked to and fro in the long room for an hour.

"You are nervous, sister; this drug you have taken, whatever it is, has unstrung you somewhat; had you not better lie down till Bertrand returns?"

So Crystel went to her room, and Hellice sat down stairs at her sewing.

Perhaps the girl lay several minutes; then she arose and dressed herself.

"Hellice, have you any commission for me at The Towers? I am going over for the afternoon."

Miss Roscoe laid down her work and gazed anxiously at the flushed cheeks and bright eyes.

"I fear you are not well, Crystel. Do you think you are strong enough to venture over alone? You had better let Peter go with you."

"Oh, no, I'd rather go by myself. Besides, Hellice, I am going to have company home."

She was assisted to dress by Annette, whom she had come to like in preference to Lida, who, though recovered from the throat disease, was still a victim to a light, disagreeable fever.

"You had better let me go too, Miss Crystel," Annette asked, very solicitously.

"There is no need, indeed. If you want a turn in the warm sunshine, you can spend an hour or so, till I get back, down at Lida's."

"Yes, ma'am, I will, and much obliged."

So off went Crystel, her sister watching her from the window out of sight; then she turned, retraced her steps, and walked up to the depot, and bought a ticket for New York.

She had just reached the entrance-gate, when Annette locked the door, and hastily retired to her own room; one she occupied alone.

"All the disguise I need will be to arrange this gray hair of mine, and powder my face as white as I can. These heretofore tell-tale eyes of mine have done their last mischief, curse him!"

And, indeed, in her plain, dark dress and sacque, the puffs of gray hair, the dull lustrous eyes, no one, not even Clifford Temple or Mrs. St. Havens herself, would have known her.

She had plenty of time to get to the station; and by going down a side-entrance, she met no one of the family servants.

"I wonder if my suspicions are correct? Could she have gone to The Towers? or did I read her thoughts aright, and see her from her own window as she hastened back this way? At any rate, if she's not at the depot—and what she means by going is more than even I can tell; however, she shall never get out of my sight while I have the power to watch her—as I said, if she's not at the depot, it's easy coming home again."

Such were Annette's thoughts as she hurried along.

At the window stood Crystel, softly tapping the glass with her kid-gloved fingers; then the train came rushing in. Crystel placed her hand in her pocket to take from thence her portmonnaie, that she never deemed safe in a crowd out of her hands.

Once in the train, she replaced it, and found, to her vexation, that she had lost both her handkerchief and a valued pen-knife—a gold-and-pearl-handled one, that had been a present from Hellice years before, when she was a school-girl, and that bore her initials, C. R., handsomely engraved. She uttered a little exclamation, and the lady who sat next her looked up from the afternoon paper she was reading.

"Have you lost your money?"

It was a rather strained, harsh voice, and Crystel glanced at the massive gray puff of hair that filled the inside of her bonnet; a small plain sacque and dark dress; the cotton gloves; the brown veil; in her inquisitive way, before she answered.

"No, thank you. Only my handkerchief and pen-knife."

Then she leaned toward the window, and dismissing the thought of her trifling loss, was soon deep in the plans that had led her to thus secretly go to the city. She had but one object, and that was, knowing where Bertrand had gone, to follow, and thus satisfy herself as to whether the strange, bold girl who had mar-

ried him had any designs on his life, since he had repulsed her love.

Crystel loved Bertrand greatly, and it was that love that urged her on; that compelled her, as it were, to follow the sudden, powerful impulse to go. What caused her to first think of it she knew not then; only in after days did she know it was the iron finger of her inevitable fate that drew her whithersoever it would.

But, after all her coming to the city, she was unable to find Bertrand; he had changed his mind as to the route he should take, and Crystel, after visiting several stores and offices where both were acquainted, returned to the depot, and reached Edenwilde a half-hour before the gentlemen.

She was a little nervous, and in her endeavors to preserve her innocent little secret, she attracted the ever-watchful attention of Hellice; and although she made no remarks, she wondered what was the matter with Crystel.

At a late hour the household retired, and Bertrand and Clifford returned to The Towers.

CHAPTER XVI.

A NIGHT'S WORK.

IT being Annette Willoughby's monthly afternoon "out," she had, on her return from the city at six o'clock, gone across the bleak lawn from the depot to the Riverside Lodge; there was sternness and unrest in her face that Lida remarked the moment she opened the door.

"Is any one at home?" she asked, as she entered.

"No one but myself; and I am an impatient prisoner. I hope to take my old position in a week at furthest. You are willing?"

Annette's lips curled.

"Delighted; for I am sickened to death of it all, since my miserable failure."

"How ever you dared to do it," said Lida, half-admiringly. "You have a wonderful brain; did you know it, Annette?"

"I shall not admit that until I bring *that* creature down low! Oh, Lida, I hate her with a hatred beside which common dislike is the highest love! I must crush her, I *shall* crush her, and for your co-operation I am here to-day."

A half-frightened look crept over Lida's face; it always did when Undine—Annette we are bound to call her—talked of further revenge.

"You are strong enough to do what I ask. First, I have in my trunk that is here my best silk suit, all my jewels and money; besides my best under-clothing, my watch and chain. These, I am confident, will fit you; put them on, Lida, and go with me to the city to-night. I will wear my alpaca suit, and go as your maid."

The girl looked woefully out of the window at the coming storm, presaged by the dull, leaden sky, the shrieking wind and the intense cold.

"You will tell me why, Annette? what I am to do?"

Annette laughed scornfully.

"Do masters generally explain to servants? It is enough to give their orders. I expect you to go—that is all. Of course you are at perfect liberty to refuse; you know the penalty, how-

ever. For my part, I would much prefer a flying trip to New York than disgrace, perhaps the prison; the gallows, for all I know."

"Mercy, Annette! *Why* need you be so cruel? Of course I will go. What hour shall I meet you at the station?"

"At seven to-night, and there's no time to spare; and remember that Mrs. Hall is to think you are alone, if she need know any thing."

It was just in time to take the 7.10 down train that the women met at the station; and together they were hastened along, neither speaking to the other.

They crossed over the city in the horse-cars, and from thence to one of the down-town ferries, where Annette led the way into the ladies' waiting-room, now deserted, for it was nearly ten o'clock.

"Now, Lida, I will tell you why I have brought you here. It is simply for the immediate furtherance of my plans. Lida, Crystel Roscoe shall suffer for her love for Bertrand Haighte; suffer because he loves her, and I shall be partly recompensed when I see *her* proud head brought low!"

Lida shrunk back into the dim corner.

"Oh, Annette! Annette!"

Annette looked up at her.

"You are shocked to learn what an enemy I can be? Be careful I am never yours, then, Lida."

"I know something dreadful is coming! Oh, Annette, for the love of sweet mercy, don't make me plunge any deeper in sin than I am!"

"Hush! this is not the place for sentimental farce, though it may be for high tragedy. Lida, *Crystel has got to be put out of the way*, and, hark you, *YOU* must do it!"

Like a hunted deer, close followed by the pitiless hounds, Lida's breath came and went in quick, short jerks.

Her eyes were strained open, horror-held, as she heard the sickening words fall from Undine Del Rose's lips.

Then a long, awful silence fell between them, broken only by the creaking of the pier and the sullen splash of the waters against the dock; for the wind was rising higher and higher, and the brewing storm closing more densely over the dark landscape.

"Well! you will do it, or—"

She never finished the sentence, for, with a cry of despair, Lida sprang from her seat.

"Never! sooner than that, I'll be a prisoner all my days! sooner than that, I'd bring my life to its everlasting close!"

And with a quick drawn breath, she rushed out on the swaying pier; a second's pause as she turned to Undine.

"My blood be upon your head!"

Then she sprang silently into the crashing, frothy waters; once she rose, her eyes wildly opened, as if imploring Heaven's forgiveness; and then she sunk again; and Undine saw a long bloody streak on her head as she was about to turn away.

With all her bravery, her diabolical strength, she shivered and trembled as she could barely retrace her steps. A horse-car passing took her up, and she went on, breathing freer amid the companionship of other living mortals.

All that long ride back to the Hudson River Depot she rejoiced at the success of her plan; for it had been her intention to goad Lida Hall on to despair; until she should either destroy herself in an utter frenzy, or accede to her demands; for either answer she was prepared to act.

Now her first duty was to write a note to Jacob Hall's wife, and drop it in the letter-box; thus, by being mailed in New York, she would mislead any suspicion that might arise as to her intimacy with Lida. For herself, she had taken good care that no one should know of her absence from Edenwilde. This she had done by lighting her lamp before she went out, that would shine out in the darkness as if she were within. She knew there would be no demands on her, as it was her own time exclusively.

She wrote the note at the depot, with a pencil, on a piece of newspaper margin:

"DEAR AUNT ELLEN:—I went down to New York this afternoon, and meeting with Joe Willoughby—you have heard me mention him—I have decided to go with him to the West. We will be married before we start. Please tell Annette. LIDA."

Undine knew Lida's handwriting well enough to mislead the eyes of uncle and aunt Hall, who would not grieve particularly on account of their niece, as no especial love had existed between them.

This letter she dropped in the box—Undine generally carried envelopes and stamps—and then took the last train up.

It was nearly twelve when she reached home; the lights were burning in the parlor, and she heard voices in conversation.

Back of the house she crept, in the shadow, and to the side-door, that led to the servants' hall; and, unobserved, she reached her room.

CHAPTER XVII.

FOUND MURDERED.

It was a cold, rainy, gloomy evening, when all New York seemed agreed to stay in-doors for the nonce; horse-cars glided over the rails with few or no passengers, and the policemen at the corners drew the rubber coats higher up around their necks and their caps lower down over their foreheads, evidently wishing their lines had fallen in pleasanter places.

It was just the time for villainy and crime to stalk forth; you could almost imagine every hurrying, solitary figure a burglar or a murderer.

Away down by one of the wharves, a crowd of people, a rough, ill-favored set, were gathered, gaping at a solemn something that men were drawing up out of the water.

At last the still burden was laid, almost reverently by those men, on the wet and slippery boards, and the crowd closed around it and looked down on the dead woman, with her long jet-black hair clinging about her slight, graceful form, and her black silk dress all wrapped in tight folds about her.

Rings sparkled on her fingers; a massive watch-chain, and a tiny watch depending from it; in her pocket was a letter, and a dainty handkerchief and a portmonnaie.

All these were carefully taken care of by the proper authorities, and the body, swollen and

bloated past possible personal recognition, was carried to the Morgue.

And the news spread, as such news will, and all the sooner because the victim was evidently wealthy and aristocratic.

People came to identify—not the body—for human skill could never have done that, but the clothing, the jewels and shoes. When a stylish, elegant lady in her barouche came weeping away from the dead girl, they showed her the letter, the handkerchief, and the weapon that was supposed to have taken her life.

Poor Mrs. St. Havens! she had felt so hurt at Undine the night of her sudden departure; and now, so soon after, she found her, murdered! dressed in the same elegant clothes she had left home in.

The portmonnaie empty, for Undine had spent her change in car fare; the web of a handkerchief, with "U. D. R." embroidered in a corner; a letter, one of Undine's own passionate outpourings to her recreant admirer; and there, horribly—infinately worse than all—was the death-wound on her throat, and the elegant little bijou of a penknife, all ornamented with gold and ebony, that was rusted over in blood, and that lay under the bosom of the murdered girl's dress, a penknife bearing the initials "C. R."

It was too horrible, and the dearest friend Undine had ever known wept and raved like a madwoman, till they carried her away to her lonely home.

Later the inquest was held, and it was decided that "Undine Del Rose had been fully identified by Mrs. St. Havens, and was believed to have come to her death by a wound in the head, committed by some unknown person, probably with a penknife marked 'C. R.'"

That was the import of the verdict, and in the papers Bertrand Haighte and Clifford Temple read it at The Towers.

It hardly seems possible to describe the effect of the news, to them so awfully sudden. Bertrand seemed almost stupefied.

"Murdered! Good God, *who* has done it! 'C. R.'—merciful Heaven, Clifford, Crystel has a pen—"

He paused, a gray pallor rushing over his face, his eyes almost starting from his head.

Clifford shivered as he laid down the paper.

"I think it has been suicide. Poor, wayward, passionate child! she must have loved you, Bertrand!"

But Haighte's ears were sealed—he was only thinking, thinking of the horrible agony that had come like a lightning-flash to his mind.

Then he clutched Clifford's arms in his excitement. "Suicide? of course; but don't you see—oh! don't you see, she has murdered herself with what I solemnly believe to be Crystel's knife? She has either stolen it or caused a counterfeit to be made after she had seen it. Oh, the fiend, the demoness! See how it will criminate my poor, hunted darling."

He paced to and fro, his eyes wearing a wild, horrified expression.

Clifford started from his chair when Bertrand had spoken, his own face wearing an aspect of trouble and anxiety.

"Let us go straight to Edenwilde and get

Crystel's knife. Of course he has it, and with it in our possession, we can defy suspicion—if suspicion there be. Again, Bertrand, the time when this deed was committed must have been, as the attending physician swore, the very day we went to New York, and while Crystel was at The Towers."

His face lighted up as he thus disposed of the case to his own satisfaction.

Then he smiled outright.

"I've just thought how extremely ridiculous we are to *dare* even *think* of connecting Crystel in this affair. Bertrand, we are insulting her."

But a coldness had seized the very vitals of the young lover.

"But there will be an investigation, and I, as a law-student, can see through it all better than your unaccustomed eyes. Who, in the eyes of the world, would so be Undine's natural enemy rather than my Crystel? All our private life will be exposed to the hungry gaze of sensational-article readers; the whole world will know more of Crystel and Undine and I than we know ourselves."

"But, by producing Crystel's knife and seeing the authorities, we can put a stop to any investigation, can't we?"

"If we can prove where my darling has been every moment since Undine left her home, I have all hopes."

"Then, let us go to Edenwilde without an instant's delay."

At Crystel Roscoe's home the news had not yet been received; the morning papers lay still unfolded on the stand, and Hellice and her sister were feeding the canaries.

They turned around as the two gentlemen entered, and without a word of salutation, Bertrand strode up to Crystel.

"For God's sake, give me your penknife!"

She blushed a little, suddenly remembering that she had lost it on her recent journey; then she grew a little terrified at Bertrand's wild manner, no less than his language.

He impatiently laid his hand on her shoulder. "Don't keep us waiting; your penknife, with the initials on."

Hellice had dropped the lump of sugar, and looked at the two in wonderment. Then Clifford explained: "You have not read the papers, ladies? If you had you could appreciate Bertrand's unusual excitement. Let me beg of you, Miss Crystel, to accede to the request."

Hellice snatched up the paper, at the same time remarking, rather haughtily—"I am sure I can not see why the paper should affect either my sister or her property."

"But I can't give it to you—I—have—lost—it."

A cry fell simultaneously from the lips of the young men; and the girl blushed to think she had thus to confess at this late day what she had hoped Hellice never would know.

"Oh, no! no, my darling, give it to me, for the love of heaven! for the sake of your own sweet life!"

Bertrand's pleading, agonizing words alarmed her; and she looked appealingly at her sister.

Hellice had read the awful lines, and was staring in white wonderment at Crystel, then by some mighty effort, spoke:

"Have you any idea where your knife was lost?"

Then Crystel knew she must confess her stolen visit.

"At the station, or near there, I fear."

"When?" demanded Bertrand.

"Last Thursday, the day you went to New York."

"Yes," and a hopeful light showed itself in Clifford's eyes. "The afternoon you spent at The Towers, I think you said?"

Crystel blushed painfully. "I did not go there. I know I said so. Bertrand, my darling, please don't be angry. I went to New York!" Then, with a hollow groan, the young man sunk to the sofa.

"Oh, my Crystel, my darling! God help you, God help you!"

Clifford was about to speak, but Hellice interrupted him, and went up to her sister, and laid her hands on her shoulder.

"I comprehend it all. Crystel, that paper says Undine Del Rose is murdered—there, don't look so white, my poor child; she was murdered the very afternoon that you were at New York, and your penknife, we fear, was found on her person."

She spoke with a dreadful calmness, and Crystel shivered, but spoke not a word. Evidently the suspicion had not taken hold of her, as yet.

"Well, what more?"

Hellice looked down into the pure, frightened eyes.

"Can you not see that it is only a matter of time as to when you shall be arrested on suspicion? Oh, my Father in Heaven, she is dying—I have killed her!"

For with the full force of that kindly cruel blow, the girl's senses had mercifully fled.

And out in the hall, amid all the confusion, Annette Willoughby smiled at the scene.

"And I'll swear I heard her say she'd 'find a way to remove her!'"

CHAPTER XVIII.

DARK DAYS.

THE body of the unfortunate girl, after the necessary formula of law had been gone through with, was conveyed to Mrs. St. Havens's residence and from there buried, in all the style befitting her station in life. Then the house had been darkened, the funeral guests departed, and Mrs. St. Havens, in her sable robes, paced the floor in restless grief.

Although not three days had elapsed since the body was discovered, the world was familiar with the facts elicited at the inquest; and, despite the power and position of the families at The Towers and Edenwilde, dark rumors and suspicions were flying the rounds of the newspapers, while one or two of the sensational illustrated weeklies had woven a romantic story, and heralded it before the hungering public eye.

It seemed strange; passing strange that all this trouble had come so suddenly upon so many people; and while the outside world were hovering before they alighted on their prey, the little world at the homesteads on the Hudson were half paralyzed with grief and fear.

General Roscoe, at the very beginning of the

trouble, had had his lawyer down at Edenwilde; while able detectives had been set to work to discover if other enemies than the supposed had been at work.

Bertrand Haighte, almost beside himself with grief and horror, had instantly gone down to Lawyer Allan: and in blissful ignorance of the perfidy and deceit of his trusted legal adviser, had poured the story of his agony in his ears; probably more as a friend than a client. To his surprise, he found Lawyer Allan as stricken with grief at the untoward fate of Undine Del Rose as was Bertrand at Crystel's danger.

To his greater surprise, the man refused his counsel, and even asserted his own conviction that Crystel had murdered the girl in a fit of revengeful anger.

Bertrand turned, in passionate indignation, to the man. "I wonder how you dare utter such words to me, sir. You, who have enjoyed the confidence of my family these many years, to desert the standard when the first fight threatens. Mr. Allan, I beg you will make ready whatever account you have against me, and make a full return of all the papers and documents. I shall transfer my business to another firm. Mr. Allan, good-morning."

And Bertrand walked indignantly out of the office, while the lawyer watched him with reddened cheeks and kindling eyes; then, when he was out of sight, his anger found vent.

"Take your business wherever you please, but remember you have bearded the lion in his den! You may have hated her, but I loved her. You may seek to cover the guilt of the girl who took her precious life, but it shall be *my* task to convict her before the world! Urged on by love and hate—most potent powers that sway the heart of man, I shall succeed! I have thwarted you before to-day, Bertrand Haighte, for my darling's sake! I shall thwart you again for it!"

He gathered up the business documents of Bertrand's, and summoned his confidential messenger to take the first train for The Towers.

Then he donned his hat; called a carriage, and drove straight to Mrs. St. Havens's.

When he re-entered the carriage that had waited over three hours, his face betokened his triumph.

"I shall succeed in avenging my Undine's death! And now for work, earnest work!"

It had been no difficult matter for Bertrand to secure the services of the world-famed firm of Trask & Trask; and although he had at first thought there possibly might be some way of escape for Crystel, he was convinced the moment he left Lawyer Allan that an action would be brought against Crystel for the charge of murder, preferred by Mrs. St. Havens.

It was a week before it was done; a week of such agony at Edenwilde as few of earth's children are called to endure.

And then it came; for all it had been feared and expected, it fell like a thunderbolt, when, with all due formality, yet respectful mien, the officer of the law rode out to Edenwilde in his close carriage, attended by his deputies, to arrest Crystel Roscoe!

In all the pitiful loveliness of her striking girl-

hood, she was taken to the city; by her side, more tender and loving than her wont, the faithful sister remained, while General Roscoe and Bertrand followed in their carriage.

All these past days Crystel had lived in a sort of a pathetic stupor; she had not seemed to be conscious of her danger; she was not at all alarmed or worried; simply calmly indifferent. She knew that she was suspected of the most horrible crime that can be mentioned, and yet she was not moved thereby.

"Why should I weep as you do? I am innocent, and why should I suffer? Only for you and papa, and poor dear Bertrand!"

Then her lips would quiver, but she would bravely smile in her sister's heart-broken face.

In all her fair, delicate beauty she faced the surging sea of eyes that filled the court-room; her sweet face, more girlish than ever since the agony that had paled it, her tender, wistful eyes, her red, trembling lips and flushed cheeks were stronger proofs of her innocence to many a keen-eyed man than all the array of evidence against her.

We need not weary the reader with a detailed account of that long, tedious week of keenest, intensest suspense; when the flattering hopes, the blighted fears first heightened, then depressed their spirits; how, when the nights came, and they took the prisoner to her cell, she and Hellice wept in each other's arms, while the lover and the father paced the long corridor in distracted anguish.

Every effort had been made to have her conveyed to a hotel at night; bail for her appearance had been instantly offered to the extent of a half-million dollars; but it was not accepted. The offense was a capital one, and to the common cell, under the roof with common felons, Crystel had to go.

The warder's wife had done all she could for the poor girl's comfort, and it was almost touching to see the attempts she had made to hide the staring prison-look of the dingy rooms. A strip of gay Turkey rug was spread on the floor, white sheets and a lace-edged pillow-case were on the cot; a little curtain was hung to hide the iron bars of the window, and two cushioned rocking-chairs had been brought in.

Day after day the sisters took their seats and listened while it was proved beyond the shadow of a doubt that the knife was Crystel's very own; it was shown how she had visited New York on the fatal day; how she had seemed agitated and nervous both going and coming on the trains.

Lawyer Allan, in all the glee of his devilish triumph, said he was prepared to prove, as a final evidence, that the prisoner had been heard to declare, in the presence of important witnesses, that she would find a way of removing deceased from her path, or Mr. Haighte's, which was pretty much the same. Murmurs of horror and indignation arose from various parts of the room, and Bertrand sprung to his feet in insulted wrath.

"How dare—"

Then remembering himself, he sunk down in his chair again.

"Annette Willoughby, you will now state, on your oath, what you heard the prisoner re-

peat to Mr. Bertrand Haighte and Mr. Clifford Temple, in the presence of her sister, Miss Hellice Roscoe."

Every ear was strained, and a silence like death reigned. The persons mentioned were astonished at the lawyer's words, and awaited with ready, indignant denials, knowing full well that Crystel never used such manner of language. A low cry of wounded pride came from the lips of the family when they saw this woman, one who had slept under their roof and eaten at their table, ascend to the witness-stand.

In a cold, heartless voice the woman told her story.

She had been coming to the drawing-room with a shawl for Miss Crystel. The doors were all open, and she had heard a great deal about the romantic affair that occurred the night before she came, and when the voice of the bride-elect fell on her ear, she instinctively listened, with a sort of curious awe, and she heard the prisoner say: "Undine Del Rose dare not cross his path again! Let her but attempt it and I will find a way to remove her!" Then they laughed, and she went on; she'd never 'a' thought of it again, if it hadn't struck her all of a sudden that it was her duty.

The lawyer glanced triumphantly at Bertrand.

Pale as ashes, his eyes glittering, he was staring at Crystel; Hellice's face was buried in her hands, and Mr. Temple was biting his lips and looking bitterly at the woman.

Crystel's tears burst forth, for the first time during that long, long time of excitement.

"I charge you, on the Holy Evangel of God, to say if this be true, Bertrand Haighte."

He arose, with his anguish in his face.

"May God in heaven succor her, and forgive these lips that criminate her; *it is true!*"

"And your oath, sir?"

He turned to Clifford.

"It is true," he replied.

"Miss Hellice!"

"She never meant it when she said it—never!"

Then Crystel stood up, pale and calm.

"I know I said it; but why those innocent, loving words should condemn me, God only knows. I do not."

Then she resumed her seat.

The jury went out; they came in; and—we spare the sickening details—Crystel Roscoe was found *guilty*, and remanded to her cell! And Annette Willoughby went away with a horrible smile on her pale lips, and a light in her eyes that seemed a flash of some old-time brilliance!

CHAPTER XIX.

IN HER CELL.

It seemed as though the blackness of darkness had forever closed over the households at Edenwilde and The Towers.

Every thing had happened so suddenly; event followed event in such rapid succession, that it seemed impossible to believe they had actually transpired.

I hardly know how to describe the life of Crystel Roscoe after she knew she was doomed.

At first she had lain in fearful convulsions, while friends, lover and relatives stood by, praying that her life would go out with every passing breath; but an inscrutable Providence disregarded their pleadings, and Crystel grew well and strong—for *what?*

After her consciousness returned fully, it seemed as though her reason could not stand the awful pressure; she would scream in her anguish, and beg and pray them to help her—her, who never harmed a fly—till the stern old man on guard at the door would weep like a child.

Every effort was being made to procure a respite; thousands of dollars were offered by the Roscoes, the Haightes, and Temples for the real murderer to come forth; he was promised his life by the State authorities to turn himself over; and all the while, though the popular feeling was for Crystel, the hours went on and on, fraught with their burden of

unutterable woe to many a heart that beat so proudly so shortly before.

The day appointed for the termination of the tragedy was still several weeks off; and lawyers and relatives were striving for a pardon. Friends, by hundreds, had signed the touching petition to the Governor, and it had been forwarded.

Crystel and Hellice were not told of it, for the fear that it might fail.

Day after day had dragged along, while hopes ran high as to the result; the while Bertrand, full of surety that it could not end unfavorably, in that General Roscoe was a power in the State, as well as a warm personal friend of the authority who held so many lives in his hand! so Bertrand, who had never lost sight of it, but which had sunk to mere triviality compared to the solemn doings of late, had instructed his lawyer to apply for a divorce from Undine Del Rose.

There was not the slightest difficulty in procuring it; the only question being a matter of time.

A fortnight, a month rolled on, and then one day there came a woman who had gained permission to see the prisoner.

Hellice was with her, as she had been for a long time, almost as pale as the doomed girl herself.

The stranger was Annette Willoughby; and the sisters shrunk from her as from a snake.

A grim smile parted her pale lips as she noted it.

"You naturally hate me; nor do I wonder at it; yet, for all that, I have come to see if I cannot be of service to you: you, Miss Crystel."

But it was Hellice who made answer.

"You can do nothing more acceptable than to leave us."

She scarcely deigned a glance toward her, and her tones were chillingly distant.

"Miss Crystel, may I beg a private interview of a few minutes?"

Crystel opened her eyes languidly.

"As you say. You can harm me no further."

She was lying, as she had for several days, with her hands clasped around her neck.

"If my sister desires it, she shall have her will obeyed. Crystel, dearest, I will remain within call."

She walked across the cell and out into the corridor.

Then Annette Willoughby drew her vacant chair up to Crystel's cot, and fixed her dull, dead eyes on the girl's bloodless face.

"I said I knew you hated me; but not so badly as I hate you."

These singular words roused Crystel; in her drifting away from all earthly happiness, it seemed so cruel to wound her thus. Her lips quivered.

"I know not why you should, Annette. I never have wronged you."

"But you have, you have!"

The words came in a passionately-quick utterance, and Crystel wondered, in her vague way, if the woman were crazy.

"You thwarted my best friend; you took the man my best friend had almost won; you broke her heart, and then you murdered her—murdered her, *they say!*"

She whispered the last words in a horrible, low tone.

"Yes, 'they say,' but you don't believe it, do you? How *can* they think I did it?"

The dead, dull eyes grew momentarily bright, as the woman replied:

"That is what I came for. I not only believe you to be innocent, but I *know* it! I can prove it!"

Then Crystel sprang from her cot, her blood dashing madly through her veins; her eyes springing from her head in the rapturous joy of the moment.

She fell on her knees before Annette, and kissed her cold hand again and again.

"God bless you, my angel of deliverance! Oh, what can I say, what can I do to thank you? Take all my jewels, all my property, Edenwilde—everything—and then I will be in your debt forever!"

Annette flung her pleading, twining hands away, a bitter sneer on her lips.

"Yes, I can prove it. I know everything about it; I saw the blow struck, and can lay my hands on the person at any time. Do you hear *that*, Crystel Roscoe? I can lead you forth as free as the breeze that is lifting your curls! Would you go?"

"Would I go! what mockery! Take me, Annette, whithersoever you will—only take me away from here. For God's sake, free me!"

She wound her arms around Annette's knees in beseeching agony. Annette laughed outright.

"I say I can do it; but, Crystel Roscoe, unless you give your lover up, *I'll not do it!*"

A scream, loud, piercing, fell from the girl's lips as she reeled a moment, then fainted just as Hellice rushed in to her aid.

"You have done this?"

She pointed sternly to Annette, who was going away; she stopped a moment, as she answered:

"I think not. She is nervous and weak."

Then she went out, to encounter Bertrand Haighte in the hall. He lifted his head absently as he jostled against her.

"I beg your pardon, madam."

She murmured an unintelligible reply, gazing after him, her foot tapping—tapping on the floor, as if some great inward passion thus found partial vent.

"Go on your way, Bertrand Haighte! But we will see if Undine Del Rose shall not be avenged!"

CHAPTER XX.

A NEW SURPRISE.

BERTRAND found Hellice tenderly chafing Crystel's cold hands and striving to check the heartrending moans that were breaking from her lips.

"What is it, my darling? Tell me, and I will strive to comfort you, though God knows I shall never know myself what that word means."

She smoothed his face with her little wan hand.

"It was hard before—but it's worse now. Oh, Bertrand, it maddens me to know she can prove my innocence, and she won't because she hates *me* so!"

Bertrand and Hellice started at her words.

"What? *who* can prove it?"

"Annette—but she won't. I begged and prayed; I offered her all, everything, but she laughed and said not unless I gave *you* up, my Bertrand."

He sprang from his chair, heedless of her loving caress.

"A sudden light has flashed over me—oh, Crystel, Hellice, go down on your knees and pray as you never prayed before, that at the last He will grant justice!"

He snatched a kiss from Crystel's lips, wrung Hellice's hands, and started on a tearing run after Annette Willoughby.

She had only reached the nearest corner, when she heard his flying footsteps; and the strange smile that so illy befitted her pale lips, flitted over them.

He strove to calm himself as he laid his hand lightly on her shoulder.

"Annette—this is you? You have just left Miss Crystel, and I must see you at once!"

"If you wish it, my rooms are near at hand. I am going to them now."

They walked on one or two blocks, and then Annette preceded him up the stairs of a plain, decent house, to a front room, scantily furnished.

"Now, Mr. Haighte, I am at your service."

She removed her shawl and bonnet, revealing her short, gray hair and sallow neck.

"I need waste no words on preliminary courtesy. I want to know what your authority is in telling Miss Crystel Roscoe that you can prove her innocence, and another one's guilt?"

He spoke sternly and rapidly.

"And if I decline to answer you?"

"Then I shall summon the police and arrest you. On the whole, I prefer that plan, anyhow."

He stepped to raise the window, when the cold

muzzle of a pistol touched his temple. He glanced around, and met a pair of demoniac black eyes dancing before him; a mouth wreathed in bitterest scorn and wildest triumph.

For a moment he stood horrified at the sight; then her cool, clear tones fell on his ears:

"If you think to thwart me after all this time, you are mistaken, Bertrand Haighte! Do you know *now* why I can prove your 'betrothed bride's' innocence? Do you comprehend that for hate and revenge, I will not? No! With this revolver on your temple and my finger on the trigger, I defy you! I laugh you to scorn, and bid you go on to the execution day, and see her hung—HUNG BY THE NECK, and then remember that I helped to do it. I, your lawful wife! I, your discarded wife! I, whom people think lies dead and buried. I, a living woman, whom Crystel Roscoe shall be hung for! I, *Undine Del Rose Haighte!*"

The sharp crack of a pistol followed her shrill words, and Bertrand Haighte fell to the floor, his life-blood streaming over his beautiful hair, and down his still, white face!

CHAPTER XXI.

A LAST ATTEMPT.

FOR a second, Undine—we may as well call her so—stood looking at what she had done; then laying the revolver on the carpet near where Bertrand lay, she sped down the rear staircase, through the yard, climbed over a pile of lumber, and from thence into a back street. Here she paused for a moment, then walked leisurely on toward the river.

"I will take this route to the depot; if I am pursued I will drown myself, as *she* did."

It seemed as though her evil genius was protecting her, for she reached the Thirty-first station safely, purchased a ticket, not for Edenwilde station, where she eventually intended going, but one several miles beyond. From this station she walked back, reaching the Riverside Lodge just in the dense darkness that precedes day-dawn.

Mrs. Hall came down to let her in.

"Since Lida's gone off on her goose-chase all the work falls onto me."

"Why, has Lida gone away?"

Undine's tones were expressive of surprise.

"Gone away! I should think so. She jined that 'ere brother o' yours somewhere in New York—and you needn't tell me she went off to the city on her own accord; she's got a secret letter from him, I'll bet—and off they went, the land knows where."

Undine was perfectly indifferent under all.

"Joe's a good fellow enough, Mrs. Hall, I'm sure."

"Good or not, I take it he can't be great shakes, enticin' her off so. She was sick when she went, and I shouldn't wonder if I heard of her death next."

Her words suggested a delightful idea to Undine.

Hear of her death? indeed, Mrs. Hall *should* hear of Lida's death, and thus her tracks would again be covered.

Up in her silent bedroom, Undine lay thinking, thinking, till it seemed her very brain was reeling.

She was angry that she had discovered herself to Bertrand Haighte. *Why* had she suffered herself to undo the very thing she had been so long doing?

"But he *shall* not find me! not if I have to take my own life in the presence of the officers whom he may send to arrest me. What shall I do?"

Until the sun was house high she lay thus, planning how to escape the snare she had laid for her own feet. Then, when she went to her breakfast, she was ready for action.

"Mrs. Hall, you are going out to-day?"

"To The Towers, to help Mrs. Bowen bleach that new piece of linen; and a mean job it is, too. Old Black Moll promised to come and help us hang it up. There ain't a blessed soul at The Towers but Mrs. Bowen and Rachael now; all the maids is down to the trial with the ladies. Poor, dear Miss Crystel!"

"Suppose I run down and see where Moll is, as I go to the depot? I only came up in a hurry to get a

change of underclothes. Miss Hellice 'll expect me back right away. If Moll is sick or anything, she can send somebody else, I suppose?"

"I don't care who, 's long as they can work."

So, bidding Mrs. Hall and her husband good-by, Undine hurried down the shady garden-walk, to a side road that led to a cabin on the edge of the estate, where Black Moll and one or two sisters lived.

There had been strange talk about this old woman, and people said she was a witch; others, better informed, knew she pretended to tell fortunes, while a very few, and Undine among them, knew that for money she would do anything.

To this woman therefore, Undine went, in her extremity, for she fully realized how she was situated herself. She entered the miserable cabin, and after an hour's interview, there came out a smart young negress, who walked up to The Towers to help Mrs. Bowen hang up the linen.

Of all her disguises, this was the most perfect. She fairly shrunk from her own self when she saw her reflection in the little glass over Black Moll's table. But it was a fearful game she was playing now. She had, perhaps, murdered a human being, and her own life depended on her acuteness.

"Remember the terms. I will come here again in a fortnight."

"And don't fergit you leab youah 'fectiations a' Moll in de ole cab'n, July."

The old woman roared out her parting injunction, and the brave girl—for she *was* courageous—set out to defy the justice she knew was on her track.

"They'll never think of looking for me *here*. If Bertrand recovers, and can tell the story, I wonder which would be the sweetest revenge: to have him die with the secret locked between his lips and her to be hung for *my* murder, or have him blazon the truth, and then, with no proof to substantiate it, see her choked to death before his eyes, when he knows I am living. On the whole, I prefer the latter. One thing is sure as fate: I never will be taken alive, if worst comes to worst! I've a trusty agent *here* that will relieve me of life in a second."

She touched a small, white glass bead that hung under her dress, tied around her neck.

"I have but to crush the glass in my hand, and the contact of the poison on the spot where the glass cuts the skin is certain death."

A gleam of defiance shone in her eyes a moment; then, as the gray heights of The Towers loomed up closely before her, a bitter smile curled her lips.

Then she walked up into the laundry and told Mrs. Bowen she came in place of Black Moll, who was sick.

"It makes no difference to me, so you can help. Begin at the end—there."

When the work was done that night, she asked if Mrs. Bowen wanted anything else done to-morrow.

"There's enough to do, dear knows. Can you polish silver and shine glass? If you can, and can wash and iron, I'll keep you till the other girls come."

"I can't wash and iron; but I can do the rest. Aunt Moll will do that for you."

"You may as well stay then. You seem a smart sort of a nigger."

And so a fate that was closing hopelessly over her, though she was all unconscious of it, settled "July," the colored servant, at The Towers.

CHAPTER XXII.

LIGHT IN DARKNESS.

It was high noon of the next day when Bertrand Haighte awoke from the long, dreamless sleep that came so near bearing him into Eternity.

He had been seriously shot, and lay in prone unconsciousness all those long hours; alike unaware as to how the discharge of the pistol had attracted a chance passer-by, who had given the alarm; how Clifford Temple and Crystel's father had been sent for by the officer, who recognized him; how they had tenderly carried him to his hotel, with terrified awe that any one had dared to attempt his life.

They could do almost nothing; true, detectives were scouring the vicinity, but there was not a trace left of the assassin's tracks.

Little by little life came flowing back through his veins; then, when every one save his mother had been kindly banished from the room, he slowly opened his eyes and glanced around.

At first he smiled in Mrs. Haighte's face; then, like a lightning-flash, his memory awoke to a full sense of what had transpired.

"Quick—the police! Mother, Undine is alive—alive, and she tried to kill me!"

Then, when the secret had fled from his lips, he fainted again.

But it was enough; intelligence was quickly dispatched to the authorities, and the wildest excitement reigned among the few who heard the news.

General Roscoe himself flew back to the jail, where the night had passed in such strangely torturous emotion to the sisters, to tell the wondrous news. Hellice clasped her sister in her arms.

"My darling, let us thank God for this one ray of hope; it *may* be only a chimera that dear Bertrand has imagined in his excitement; yet I think he is correct. You say he will recover, father?"

"We have every reason to believe so. I firmly believe God will raise him up to bring justice to light. Crystel, my angel child, I am glad to see you cry once more."

The storm of tears that nothing could bring had flowed when she heard of Bertrand's danger, and she knelt, with clasped hands and streaming eyes, beside the little cot, in silent, agonizing prayer.

"Father, can you explain this awful mystery? If Undine Del Rose is alive, why should not Crystel go free this moment? If Undine was *not* murdered, *who* was?"

"That I can not say, my child. The proof of Bertrand's affidavit will soon be forthcoming if he was right. We have started a dozen detectives on her track. God send speedy success!"

Then, in his agitation to learn more of this strange news, he hastened back to Bertrand's bedside.

He had recovered again, and was doing well; and as it was simply impossible to keep him quiet when so much was at stake, the attending physicians declared that, as no unfavorable symptoms had manifested themselves, perhaps it would be a help, instead of a hindrance, to relieve his mind by discussing the affair with his friends.

"It is just six weeks ago to-day, Bertand, that you applied for this; see?"

It was a large, business-like paper; and it needed but a glance to see it was a bill of divorce between Bertrand and Undine.

"I only wanted it for Crystel's sake; after we thought she was dead it was too late to stop proceedings. As it is, it is a good thing."

The second week of Bertrand's convalescence brought the answer to the petition; his excellency had granted a respite of a month; a pardon was deemed inadvisable, in the existing state of affairs.

Day by day Bertrand lay on his bed, or sat in his chair, reading letters from the various agents employed, and receiving almost hourly telegraphic communications. And then, one day—the day on which Crystel was to have been hung had it not been for the merciful respite—there came a telegram of one word; only five letters, but a word that at once and forever dissipated the long, long night of anguish, torture and doubt.

The word was "FOUND;" and it was telegraphed from Edenwilde station an hour before, and signed by the detective.

Like wildfire the news flew from mouth to mouth; the very bootblacks on the corner spoke of it; and Clifford Temple and General Roscoe dashed off to the jail to bear the glad tidings.

"Darling! darling! you are free—free forever! The detectives have found her, my children, and her very existence leaves you spotless before the world!"

Hellice! Crystel! can we ever repay our maker for His boundless mercy?"

And the stern old man, with his arm around his children's necks, wept like a woman.

CHAPTER XXI.

REUNITED.

THE same afternoon that Bertrand had received the telegram Undine, in all the quiet stupidity that became her to play, as July, the negress, was sitting in the little kitchen, gazing absently out the little window on the sere, somber winter robes of the Highlands, when a knock on the door, close beside her, aroused her with a start, as every noise did now.

She started to open it, just as Mrs. Bowen came rushing into the room, her cap-strings flying, her face all full of terror.

"Bless me, whatever can them perlice—"

Then the outer door opened, and two detectives sprung in, each seizing a wrist, while Undine, with a moan of terror, sunk powerless at their feet.

"We beg pardon, ma'am, but we had to intrude. This young woman here is Miss Undine Del Rose, arrested for an attempt on the life of your master, young Mr. Haighte!"

Mrs. Bowen gazed in stupid awe at the speaker.

"You don't mean to say this nigger, July, is a lady—why, bless my soul, I thought poor, dear Miss Crystel was in jail for killing that Un—something. This can't be her!"

This puzzled frown was contracting the old lady's face.

"This is she, and Miss Roscoe will be free by to-morrow this time. Come, Miss Del Rose, time's precious."

"The saints be praised!" ejaculated the old housekeeper, raising her apron to wipe the tears under her glasses. "Now, you black—you white baggage, the with you!"

But, after all the load she had borne so long alone, the last feather had broken her courageous spirit; she had sunk into a deep faint, and lay motionless on the floor.

"This disguise may as well be removed. Could you assist us, madam?"

"Could I? indeed I believe I'm none too good to take her to death!"

And so between the three Undine was restored to her natural appearance, while Mrs. Bowen, all unconscious of the dreadful agent it contained, threw the fatal glass bead far out of the window.

It was not until an hour after that Undine recovered; and then, with her first moment's strength, thrust her hand in her bosom. With a scream of baffled rage she drew it forth.

"Who has dared meddle with me? Woman, it was you!"

"Of course it was; there now!"

Undine's lips moved, but no words intelligible came from them; then the men conducted her forth and lifted her into the carriage, in which they drove to the city.

At the station they were met by crowds of curious people, who followed the party to the Tombs, whither Undine Del Rose was carried.

Retributive justice had brought her under the same roof, a prisoner with Crystel Roscoe, who was only waiting a form of law to set her bodily free.

Early the next day the sheriff read the honorable discharge; and amid a throng of men, who with bare heads and moist eyes lined the street, Crystel drove to the hotel.

A meeting it was between the friends that is too sacred to reveal; there were silent, solemn grasps of the hand, add inaudible praises for God's great mercy; while Crystel, so pale, so passing fair, knelt at Bertrand's side, her own sweet smile shining through her tears, and his strong hands trembling like a child's as they lay on her sunny bright hair.

And then, the dear old rector of Edenwilde, who had come to rejoice with them, prayed; and when

he had arisen from his knees, they all felt that the cloud had dispersed, and the silver lining would shine for them forever.

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE LAST OF THE PLAY.

By some strange coincidence, Undine Del Rose was consigned to the same cell that Crystel Roscoe had left; but it was not for long, for a fearful brain fever followed the reaction of all those months of misery. When she recovered her strength and health, the light of her reason had gone out, and she was an idiot; a silent, harmless, pitiful woman, who would sit all day long holding her hands, never moving or speaking.

With all the agony of a strong love, Mrs. St. Havens had nursed her, and tended her through her long, tedious illness, during the delirium of which she had told over and over again her plans, her successes, until a complete confession was obtained that declared its own truthfulness.

At her recovery, Undine was carried to her old home, where, in the depths of her grief, Mrs. St. Havens cared for her as a mother should.

For Undine was her own child; the daughter of Bertrand Haighte's father, and Bertrand's half-sister! That was the cause of her impassioned warning to the wayward girl when she had declared she would marry Bertrand Haighte, and that the reason of Clifford Temple's solemn caution; Temple knew the secret that the Haightes never had learned, and had loved the girl despite her illegitimate birth, which Mrs. St. Havens had sworn never to acknowledge.

Little had Bertrand dreamed that by the threat that "Florian still lives," was meant Undine, whose name had been changed by her fearful mother; and of whom Mr. Haighte had recorded the warning to his son, knowing, in his moments of lucidness, that there was a chance that his two children might meet and ignorantly love.

Of Lida Hall's suicidal death her aunt never knew, or her uncle; they never heard from her, and believed her to be somewhere in the West.

Poor Lida!

How the body drawn from the river was supposed to be Undine's was never explained; it is a mystery to-day—save to our readers.

And now to drop the curtain on these dark scenes forever!

Two years have passed on fleet wings, and now we invite our readers to the double wedding in the little Edenwilde chapel.

It is not as grand as you think becoming to the Roscoes, the Haightes and Temples; but when you remember the darkness that brooded so long, you will agree it is best.

The ceremonies have been pronounced, and the few guests have congratulated the brides; Clifford Temple and Lurline, his wife, have driven to Edenwilde, whither the wedding breakfast is to be celebrated; and Bertrand and Crystel linger a moment as their carriage drives up.

His arm is around her waist, and he is looking down in her pure, sad eyes, that wear a shadow happiness can never drive away.

"My own wife at last!"

"Yes, dearest Bertrand, and is not our happiness the sweeter that it has been so dearly earned?"

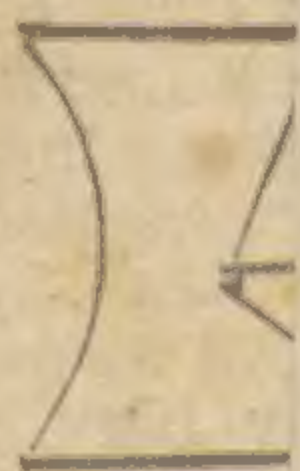
"We can never forget the dark days, darling; but we will look forward to the beautiful bright ones that we shall enjoy forever together!"

Thus they started their life journey; both not unscathed by the fiery trial, yet purified and strengthened.

Meanwhile Hellice Roscoe and Gussie Haighte are contentedly intrenched behind the earthworks they call single blessedness; the General and Mrs. Haighte happy in their children's happiness.

And what more can be said?

THE END.



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